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by
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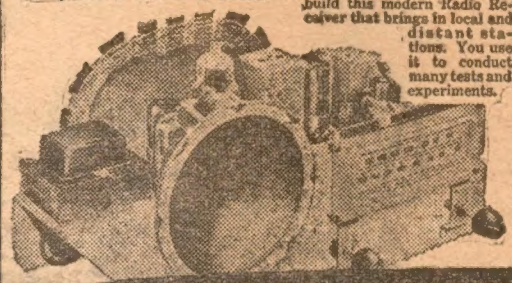

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FIGHTING WESTERN

MAY, 1950 Vol. 5, No. 5

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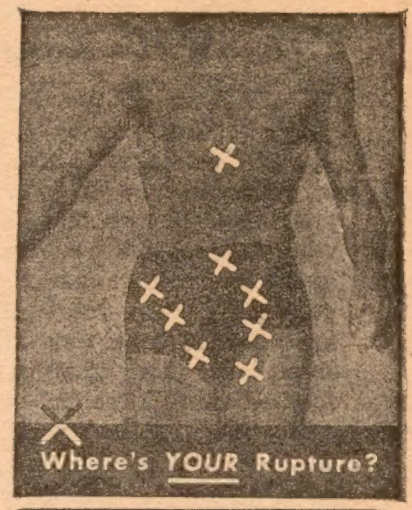

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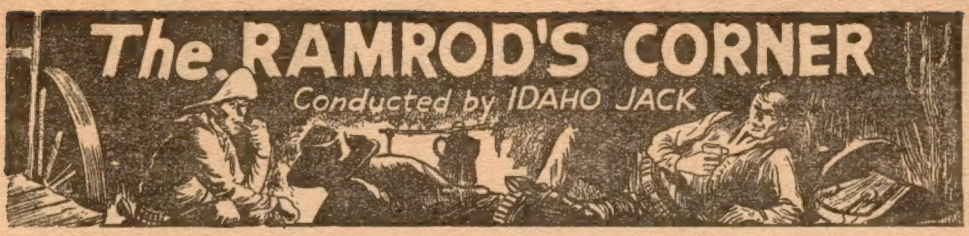

REIN in, all you tophands, and let's make tracks down to the bunkhouse. There's a big pot of Arbuckles on the stove, so help yourselves, but we sure hope you like your coffee black 'cause we're plumb out of cream and sugar. And now that you've got your tin cups filled and have settled back nice and comfortable, we'll see what the mailman fetched us this month.

Here's a neat looking letter from a gent down in Odessa, Texas. Welcome to the RAMROD'S CORNER, Bill Lubbock.

"Read most issues of FIGHTING WESTERN and think it's okay, but I wish that now and then you'd publish some stories about oil in the cattle country. Here in Odessa, we've just about forgotten that we once had a big cattle industry. Back in 1926 there were only about 500 people here, but with the discovery of oil the town boomed and we now boast of a population of over 40,000. Most of the cattle outfits have gone out of business and derricks dot the land where once cattle roamed. We're about half way between El Paso and Fort Worth—the heart of one of the nation's biggest petroleum reservoirs —the great Permian basin of west Texas and southeastern New Mexico."

Thanks for dropping in, Bill, and we'll try to talk one of our word wranglers into doing a good yarn about black gold real soon.

ROY DAVLIN, of Roswell, New Mexico, answers our request for cow-country yarns with the following:

"Back in the eighties, there were some pretty tough hands working for the Ladder outfit, and Buck Carlson, the ramrod, was the toughest of the lot. One day Buck was down at the corral with some of his hands when a young innocent-eyed fellow rode up and said he was looking for a job.

"Buck sized him up. 'We don't hire fellas around here that ain't dry behind the ears.'

"'I reckon I can hold my own,' the kid drawled.

"A crooked grin twisted Buck's lips as he looked at the gun strapped about the youngster's waist. 'Sonny, I bet you couldn't hit the side of a barn with that thing.'

"The kid's face was expressionless. 'I'm fair to middlin' with a shootin' iron, Mister.'

"The Ladder crew stood around grinning broadly. The kid looked a little comical sitting on that big horse, and then Buck said, 'Come back when you grow up, sonny.' The ramrod started to turn away, but suddenly he froze, blinking in amazement at the gun that had jumped into the kid's hand.

"The kid said coldly, 'Mister, I came here to get a job.'

"That lightning draw had wiped the grins off the faces of the Ladder crew. Buck swallowed hard. 'Say, who are you, anyway?'

"The stranger smiled thinly. 'William Bonney is the name, but most folks call me Billy the Kid.'"

Thanks, Roy, for that lively little tale. Come again sometime. Always glad to hear from you.

(Continued on page 126)

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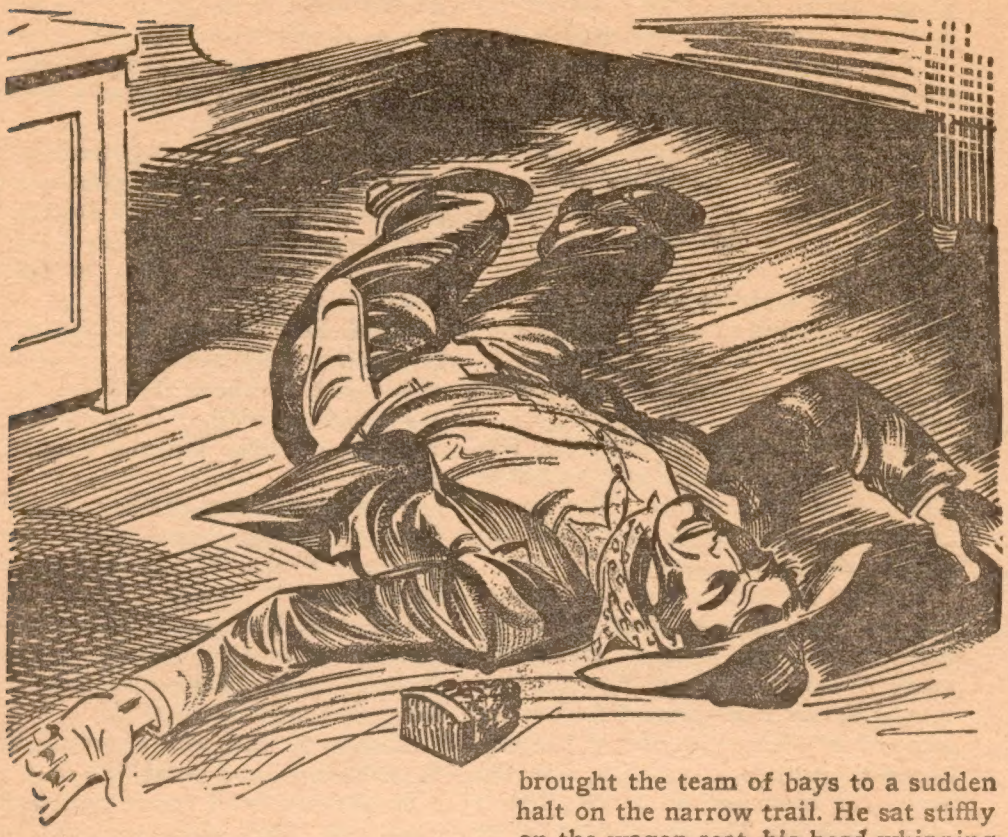
PAINT YOUR EPITAPH WITH BLOOD

By RAY GAULDEN

Bent McLean was a house painter, not a fighter. But his brother was being held in jail on a false murder charge and Bent had to do some quick figuring and hard fighting to save Bob from the rope and pin the blame for a dastardly shooting just where it belonged.

Sheila whipped a snub-nosed revolver from the front of her dress as McLean leaped across the room at her.



CHAPTER I

Bullet Welcome

THE bullet came from above Bent McLean. It screamed down through the blue spruce dotting the slope, ripping two holes in one of the five-gallon cans of paint in the back of the wagon. Jerking back on the reins, McLean brought the team of bays to a sudden halt on the narrow trail. He sat stiffly on the wagon seat, his head whipping around, his eyes searching the timbered slope on his right. He heard the swift thud of hoofs and saw a rider dodging through the tall trees.

Remaining motionless, McLean watched the rider come tearing down the shadowed slope toward him. As the rider raced across the trail in front of the wagon, McLean had a glimpse of a young face and a pair of reckless eyes, and then the rider had

dipped down the brushy slope on the other side of the trail and was out of sight.

Things were happening a little too fast for Bent McLean. He looked quickly back up the slope on his right, listening to the pound of hoofs, and watching a dozen riders break into view. They came spurring toward him and he didn't need a closer look to know that they weren't out joy riding. They were men with something pretty ugly on their minds and he figured it was a good bet that they were chasing the lone horseman.

McLean didn't care about that. What bothered him was those two holes in that five-gallon can of paint. The stuff cost money and it wasn't easy to get in the mountain boom camps.

Most of the riders swept across the trail, not paying any attention to McLean, but two of the men reined in and gave him a good going over with their eyes.

Anger was kicking around in McLean's stomach and he said roughly, "This is a public road. You gents ought to be a little more careful where you throw your lead."

One of the riders had a badge on his vest that let everybody know he was the sheriff. Without that little piece of metal, McLean figured, you would never have guessed it, for the man wasn't very impressive looking. He was small and his hat was too large for him, and he didn't have a square jaw like McLean thought most sheriffs were supposed to have.

The lawman said, "What are you hollering about? You didn't get hit, did you?"

Temper caused McLean's eyes to close down. "I didn't get hit," he said. "But somebody's bullet tore a hole in a five-gallon can of paint."

The other rider's lips twisted with disgust. "We're chasing a gold thief," he said sharply, "and this bird has the nerve to talk about his can of paint."

McLean looked at the man and he didn't care much for what he saw. The fellow was big, with a red face that was a trifle on the flabby side. He gave McLean a long, searching stare and then turned to the sheriff. "Come on, Press," he said. "Let's see if we can catch up with the boys."

EVIDENTLY the sheriff's name was Press. He shifted his weight in the saddle and sighed. "I've got to rest a minute, Beal. I've got to have a smoke. We've been chasing him all over these blasted mountains and I'm worn to a frazzle."

The man called Beal glanced in the direction the others had gone and appeared to consider what the sheriff had said. Finally he said, "I guess there's enough of them to handle him without us."

Press rolled a smoke, licking the flap and letting his eyes travel over the wagon. "Painter, huh?"

McLean nodded. "I'm heading for Boulder Gulch. Hear it's quite a place."

The lawman dragged on his smoke. "Lot of work down there for a painter," he said. "You ought to do all right, feller."

Beal had his hands folded on the saddle-horn and his muddy eyes were fastened on McLean's face. "You look kind of familiar." he said.

McLean's face was expressionless. "I've been around some," he said.

A shot sounded about half a mile away and Beal looked quickly in that direction. "Come on," he said hopefully. "Maybe they got him."

They seemed to forget about McLean as they whirled their mounts and rode swiftly down the brushy slope. He stared after them a moment, wondering what it was all about. Then he pushed the incident from his find and spoke to the team. He began looking for a camping spot along the mountain trail, deciding that he would not try to reach Boul-

der Gulch tonight. He was bone-tired from traveling all day and he made camp an hour later when he found a little park where there was green grass and a clear stream with cold water flowing swiftly through a rocky bed.

McLean unhitched and fed the team. Then he built a fire and cooked his supper. The chill of the high country moved in and he went to the wagon, taking out a jumper and slipping it on. He had spent most of his life in Texas and he was not used to these crisp evenings. But he figured a man wouldn't have any trouble sleeping up here. He spread his soogans under the wagon and was about to crawl in to them when he heard a sound in the aspen thicket off to his left.

McLean was on his hands and knees, his head twisted around when the man stepped into the circle of firelight. It was the same man, McLean saw, that the sheriff and his posse had been chasing. He was holding a gun in his hand now and he looked as if he meant business. He said, "Just sit tight, mister, and you won't get hurt."

McLean had no intentions of doing anything else, not with that gun staring him in the face. He watched the man come closer and he tried to grin, but he knew he didn't get very far with it. He said, "If you're looking for gold, fella, you came to the wrong place."

A frown wrinkled the stranger's forehead. "I'm not after gold," he said. "It's food I want. I've been back there watching you for quite a spell. I saw you eating and I didn't think I could stand it."

"Well, why didn't you come on in and join me?"

The stranger smiled thinly. "Didn't want to take any chances, so I waited till it was dark."

McLean began breathing a little easier. He said, "I'll stir you up some grub. You don't need to hold that gun on me."

The stranger hunkered down beside the fire. He said, "When you have a pack of wolves on your tail, your nerves get kind of raw and you don't trust folks very far."

McLean put more wood on the fire, then started slicing some bacon. "I thought maybe they had got you," he said. "I heard a shot a little while after you passed me back on the trail."

The stranger shook his head. "They wasted a lot of lead, but none of it came very close. I led them through some pretty rough country and finally gave them the slip."

McLEAN put the strips of bacon in a skillet and glanced at the stranger. The man was rolling a smoke and he seemed to have relaxed a little. He ran his eyes over the wagon, taking in the ladders and the big five gallon cans. "Looks like you're a painter."

McLean nodded. "Name's Bent McLean."

The stranger looked at him quickly. "Any kin to Bob McLean?" he asked.

There was a strange dryness in McLean's mouth. He said, "We're brothers."

The young stranger stared at McLean. He said, "I'm Cliff Dundee. They claim your brother killed my dad."

The bacon was sizzling in the skillet, but McLean wasn't paying any attention to it. He said evenly, "Bob didn't do it. When you're raised with a fellow, you get to know him pretty well. Bob's not the kind to kill a man in a card game argument."

The tension had drained out of Dundee now and he laid the gun down beside him. He said, "Bob and me were friends and they couldn't make me believe he was guilty. But that barroom jury wasn't out long."

The bacon was starting to burn and McLean turned it. Then he moved back a little and looked again at Dundee. He said, "According to what Bob wrote after they sentenced him, he was in a card game with your father and a man named Turk Rickenbaugh. Bob says he doesn't remember too much. He thinks he was doped."

Dundee nodded bitterly. "Dad had a weakness for cards, but he never played for high stakes like Rickenbaugh claimed he was doing that night."

McLean heaped a tin plate high with bacon and warmed over beans. He sat down, watching Dundee start to work on the food. "You have any idea why your father was killed?" McLean asked.

Dundee's mouth was a thin line of bitterness. He said, "Dad and a fellow named Beal Dressler were partners in the Lost Squaw mine. I never did trust Dressler. A few days after Dad was killed, Turk Rickenbaugh shows up with papers to prove that he owns Dad's half of the mine, claims Dad lost it to him in a high stakes game." Dundee's expression was grim.

The firelight played over McLean's sober face. He said, "Rickenbaugh's story is a little too pat. Bob getting into an argument with your father and killing him on the same night that Rickenbaugh has won half interest in the mine."

McLean's eyes were thoughtful for a moment and then he asked, "How come the law is after you?"

Cliff Dundee's lips folded in what was meant to be a smile. He said, "I've been waiting till they have the gold from the Lost Squaw all ready to ship, and then stealing it. The first time I held up one of their wagons, I wore a mask, but yesterday my mask slipped and they recognized me."

McLean picked up a piece of wood and laid it on the fire. His eyes were troubled. "And what do you figure on doing now?"

Dundee's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I haven't decided yet."

McLean cocked his head, listening to the sound of a horse moving down the trail. Dundee put the tin plate down quickly, his eyes wary. He grabbed his gun and got to his feet, starting toward the timber. Then he paused and looked back at McLean. "You didn't come up here just to paint, did you?"

McLean shook his head. "I do that to eat, but I don't aim to see Bob spend the rest of his life in that jailhouse."

Dundee glanced uneasily into the darkness. That rattle of hoofs was growing louder. Dundee looked back at McLean. "You could do me a favor," he said.

"Name it," McLean said.

Dundee spoke hurriedly. "I've got a sister down in Boulder Gulch. She'll be worried sick. I'd like you to tell her I'm all right, that I'll be hiding out at that old deserted mine at the upper end of Sluiceebox Creek."

"I'll do it," McLean said. "And watch yourself, fella."

Their eyes met and held for a moment. "Thanks for the grub," Dundee said. "And good luck to you."

The young man was gone quickly into the darkness and McLean stared after him, wondering how long it would be before Cliff Dundee stopped a bullet.

As he cleaned the skillet and put what little grub there was left back in the wagon, McLean watched the trail. A few minutes later a rider came into sight, but he did not stop. He was weaving a little in the saddle and he glanced at the camp without interest. Just some miner with a few too many under his belt, McLean thought, on his way home.

This was tough country, and a man was wise to keep his nose out of a lot that went on between others. Tempers were quick and so were bullets.

McLean put all his weight behind his blows, and Dressler went flying through the open doorway to the porch.

CHAPTER II

Satan's Boom Camp

BENT McLEAN reached the town of Bouder Gulch a little before noon. It wasn't much different from a

lot of other boom camps he had passed through on his way up here. There were a lot of shacks and tents and a few buildings lining a narrow, hard-packed street. He could hear the pound of the stamp mills and see the shafts dotting the sides of the mountains. He drove down the street, noting with pleasure that none of the buildings had been painted. He pulled up in front of a large false-fronted structure with a crudely lettered sign over the swinging doors that said this was the Blue Front. The front was unpainted, but that was what the sign said.

McLean climbed down and went inside. There was a fair sized crowd, even at this early hour, he noted as he strode to the long bar at the back of the big room. "Boss around?" he asked the bartender.

The apron needed to do a little reducing, and he looked as if he'd had a bad night. He was washing some glasses and he just went right on with it as though McLean hadn't said anything.

A man standing a few feet down the bar moved up beside McLean and gave the bartender a reproving stare. He said, "Joe's not a very sociable cuss, but he'll be a little more friendly when he gets a pint or so under his belt. Sometimes, I think I'll fire Joe, but he wouldn't care. He can make more money digging for gold. So, I put up with him because good bartenders are hard to get up here."

McLean grinned. "You're the boss?"

The man nodded. He was tall and very straight. The way he kept his shoulders back made McLean wonder if he had once been in the army. Some women would have said he was handsome, but McLean thought his face a little too dark and oily.

"The name's Turk Rickenbaugh, friend. What can I do for you?"

McLean could hear the drone of a croupier's voice and his eyes strayed briefly to the roulette wheel, watching a houseman give it an experimental whirl. McLean looked back at Rickenbaugh. "The name's Jones," he said. "Bent Jones. I'm a traveling painter. When I saw the front of your place, I thought we might get together."

Rickenbaugh pursed his lips and gave it some thought. "Well, we might," he said. "Have you got any blue paint?"

"Dark blue."

"I don't want it too dark."

"Just have the one shade," McLean told him, "and it's pretty dark."

Rickenbaugh thought about it some more and finally he said, "Well, I guess it will have to do. A man can't be too choosie in one of these mountain gold camps. When do you want to start?"

McLean said, "There's no use fooling around, I'll get at it right after dinner."

"That'll be fine," the saloonman said, a smile lifting the corners of his wide mouth. "Let's have a drink on it."

McLean grinned, glancing at the bartender. "Do you think we can get Joe to wait on us?"

Rickenbaugh chuckled. "We'll ask him real nice.

While they were drinking, a girl in a green dress came along the bar and stopped close to Rickenbaugh. "Who's your friend, Turk?"

Rickenbaugh set his glass down and put one elbow on the bar. He said, "This is Bent Jones. He's going to pretty the place up for us. Bent, meet Sheila LeMay, our little songbird."

SHE was wearing a little too much make-up, McLean thought, but she wasn't bad to look at. She was tall and well put together and that green dress didn't hide very much. She looked at him with bold eyes and there was the hint of a provocative smile on her red lips. She spoke to Rickenbaugh without looking at him. "I hate to break

in this way, but I've got to see you a minute, Turk."

She was still giving McLean that dazzling smile and her long lashes fluttered. She said, "I'm glad you're going to be around a while. Maybe you'll buy me a drink sometime."

"I sure will," McLean said, and in spite of himself, his eyes followed her as she and Rickenbaugh walked toward the back of the big room.

The bartender said, "Now don't get any ideas, fella. She's Turk's girl. Turk's not hard to get along with till somebody starts fooling around Sheila."

It was the first thing the man had said and McLean was a little startled. He looked at the apron, grinning. "I'm sure glad to know that you can talk. And thanks for the advice."

He went out and stood on the porch for a moment, looking idly along the street. He saw a man inspecting his wagon and he frowned as he went down the steps. The man's back was to McLean, but he turned around presently. It was the sheriff and he said, "Just looking over some of your stuff."

McLean noded pleasantly. He put one foot on the hub of the front wheel and rolled a smoke. The sheriff picked up a five inch brush from the wagon bed and dusted the palm of his hand. He said, "I'm Press Goodlow. I didn't get your name yesterday."

McLean struck a match on the side of the wagon and got his cigarette going. "The name's Bent Jones," he said. "And I'm all lined up to go to work."

The lawman held the paintbrush up and appeared to study the bristles. He said, "The wife had me paint the kitchen a couple of months ago and I never got into such a mess in my life. Had the stuff all over everything." He sighed, and then looking up at McLean, he said, "Say, if we can get together on the price, I might let you paint my house while you're here."

"I'll look it over and give you an estimate," McLean said. "I'll be around a while. How about that fellow you were chasing yesterday. Catch him?"

Goodlow shook his head, troubled shadows crossing his eyes. "No, but Beal Dressler won't give up till he does."

McLean studied the lawman. "He didn't look like a bad kid. Of course, I just had a glimpse of him."

Goodlow glanced over his shoulder as if he wanted to make certain nobody was near. He said quietly, "I always kind of liked Cliff Dundee and I hated to see him step outside the law that away. Knew his dad, and he's got the sweetest little sister you ever laid eyes on. Beth runs that boarding house down there on the edge of town, and does that girl know how to cook. She can bake the best apple pie you ever tasted."

They talked a little while longer and then the sheriff said he had better be getting home. His wife would have dinner ready and she wasn't a woman who liked to be kept waiting.

McLEAN parked the wagon in the shade at the side of the Blue Front. He unhitched and fed the team, leaving them tied to the side of the wagon. Looking along the street, he saw a sign that said *Cafe*. And when he had eaten he walked to the edge of town and found the boarding house, a two-story structure that had been painted not too long ago. It wasn't, he thought, a first class job, but at least the rough boards had been covered. McLean went up the walk and stepped onto the porch. The front door was open and he could hear a man and a woman talking. He started to knock, but the angry sound of the voices caused him to hesitate.

The man was saying, "Your brother has a hide-out somewhere, and I think you know where it is."

The woman said, "I don't know

where Cliff is, but if I did I certainly wouldn't tell you, Beal Dressler."

Dressler said sharply, "You better be careful, young lady, that you don't get mired up in this mess. And I'm not so sure that you haven't already. I'm not so sure that you haven't got the gold hid right here in the house."

McLean could tell by the sound of the girl's voice that she was trying hard to control herself. She said, "Why don't you leave me alone? I've had enough to worry about without being bothered by you."

Dressler's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "You're in no position to be getting high and mighty." His attitude to the girl was ominous.

McLean didn't care for this little act at all. And he figured it had gone far enough. He stepped inside and said quietly, "The lady doesn't care to go on with it."

Dressler turned around fast, surprise lending a blank look to his heavy face. But the surprise didn't stay there long for anger came swiftly, staining his flabby cheeks a dull red. His lips slanted and he said derisively, "So, it's that tramp painter again?"

The girl stood in the center of the room, staring at McLean curiously, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes told him that she was glad he was here.

McLean remained just inside the door, his eyes flat and cold. "What are you waiting for, Dressler?"

The big man touched his tongue to his lips. He glanced at the girl and looked as if he was going to say something. Then he closed his mouth tightly and moved toward the door. McLean stepped aside to let him pass, and for a moment it looked as if the man would leave without any trouble. But McLean knew Dressler was not used to being pushed around. A thing like this would be hard for him to take.

McLean looked at the girl and that, he realized, was a mistake. Dressler whirled suddenly, his right fist whipping up and smashing against McLean's jaw. McLean's head rocked back, but he didn't go down. He caught himself, and then he went forward, throwing both fists and putting his weight behind the blows. Dressler went flying through the open doorway backwards. He lost his footing on the edge of the porch, stood there waving his arms wildly, and then fell into the flower bed. He hit hard and he lay there a moment before he could get to his feet. Finally he struggled up, his face dark with rage. "You got tough with the wrong man, mister," he said grimly. "If you're smart, you'll leave this town in a hurry."

McLean stood on the porch, a cold, sardonic grin on his lips. "I'm not very smart about some things," he said. His anger at Dressler overcame thoughts of his own safety.

The big man left without another word and McLean turned to the girl. She had come to the doorway. Her cheeks were pale, but there was relief in her eyes. "Thanks," she said softly. "Thanks a lot."

He had a good look at her for the first time and he saw that she was small and slender. He had a hard time taking his eyes off her face. It was the prettiest, sweetest face he had ever seen. Color began climbing to her cheeks and McLean quit staring at her like a fool. He looked past her, his eyes searching the large front room. "You're all alone?" he asked.

She nodded, her eyes a trifle puzzled.

"I saw your brother last night," he said.

Her eyes sharpened with interest. "Was he—was he all right?" she asked fearfully.

McLean nodded. "He didn't have a scratch on him. He asked me to see you, to tell you he'd be hiding out at an old deserted mine at the upper end of Sluicebox Creek."

When he came to, Beth's arms were about him, trying to get him inside the house.

She stared at him closely. "Who are you, mister?"

McLean met her level stare. "I'm Bob McLean's brother, Bent."

She took a step back, her lips compressing. "Bob McLean killed my father," she said bitterly.

McLean shook his head. "Bob didn't do it, Miss. Cliff doesn't think he did and I know he didn't. That's why I'm here."

She sighed wearily and he noticed now the lines of strain about her mouth. "I've been so worried about Cliff," she said, "that I can't think straight."

McLean glanced along the street.

"I've got some work to do," he told her. "I guess I'd better be going."

Concern moved across her eyes. "Be careful," she said. "Beal Dressler is a man to look out for. I never could understand why Dad went into partnership with him. But it was always hard for Dad to see bad in anybody."

CHAPTER III

Beware of the Night

RETURNING to the Blue Front, McLean got out his extension ladder and placed it against the front of the building near one corner. He mixed one of the five gallon cans of paint thoroughly and poured some of the dark blue liquid into a smaller pail with a wire handle. After thinning the paint down some for his flat coat, he climbed the ladder and started to work. He was fast and he accomplished a lot, even though his mind wasn't on what he was doing.

He wondered how he was going to prove that Bob was innocent. He wondered how he was going to learn who the real killer was. This was a new role for him and he didn't quite know how to play his cards. He had punched cows in the Big Bend Country of Texas, and he had worked for a short time as a deputy sheriff down in Fort Worth. But it had always been hard for him having somebody telling him what to do, so he had finally gone back to the trade his father had taught him. As a painter, he could see a lot of country, and the money wasn't bad either.

Bob had written and told him about this high country that was rich with gold, but Bent McLean had been satisfied where he was, and he had not come until word reached him that his brother was in prison.

When he had painted as far as he could reach, McLean got down and moved the ladder. Finally he was able to stand on the roof of the porch and the work went much faster. There was a window at the far end of the porch and he was working under it when he heard a door open. Boots thudded across the floor inside and he heard the squeak of a swivel chair. A voice that he recognized as Dressler's said, "The girl claims she don't know where he is, but I've got a hunch she's lying. Maybe if we keep watching her, she'll lead us to him."

The swivel chair squeaked again and Turk Rickenbaugh said, "We've got to stop Dundee before he ruins us. I'll have a couple of boys keep an eye on the girl and we'll see what happens."

McLean heard the scrape of a match and Dressler said, "I had a run in with that painter you hired. I've been trying to place him since the first time I saw him. A little while ago it came to me. He looks an awful lot like Bob McLean."

Rickenbaugh whistled softly. "I remember now. Bob told me one time that he had a brother. I don't like this, Beal."

"No," Dressler said. "And he sure didn't come here just by accident."

"We'll watch him," Rickenbaugh said. "I think we can handle him all right."

"Haven't you got a drink in here?" Dressler asked.

"Killed the bottle last night," Rickenbaugh said. "Let's go downstairs. I could use a drink myself." The two men turned to the door.

McLean waited until he was sure they had gone. Then he stood up and stretched his cramped legs. He decided he had better get off the roof of the porch before they came outside and saw him, and put two and two together. He decided he had done enough for today, so he cleaned his brush and put his equipment back in the wagon. Realizing that Beth Dundee might try to see her brother, he slipped down to the boarding house and told her that she had better not

try it, that she was going to be watched.

AFTER supper that night, McLean sat on the porch of the hotel, smoking, his eyes narrowed with thought. The Blue Front was a few doors down on the other side of the street. Men were starting to pour into the saloon and McLean watched the steady stream of miners absently. A few minutes later, the batwings opened and Sheila LeMay came quickly through them. He saw her glance up and down the street, a little furtively, he thought. Then the girl went swiftly along the street, keeping close to the buildings.

Curious, McLean watched her a moment, then he arose and tossed his cigarette into the street. Keeping at a safe distance, he followed her. The street ended and the dancheall girl paused, glancing over her shoulder. McLean ducked in between two buildings. When he looked out, he saw that Sheila was hurrying on. Presently the darkness swallowed her.

The town was built at the foot of a mountain and McLean found a narrow trail twisting up through the blackjack pines. He began to climb and he could see the lights of a house not far ahead. He reached a clearing, in the center of which stood a big log house. There was moonlight here and he saw a man and a woman standing on the porch, their arms wrapped about each other. McLean remained out of sight in the darkness of the timber. He couldn't see the man well enough to recognize him, but the woman, he knew, was Sheila LeMay.

When the couple had gone inside, McLean circled the house, but the blinds were all drawn and he could neither see nor hear anything. He didn't think the man he had seen on the porch was Turk Rickenbaugh, but he decided he could gain nothing by staying here.

Boulder Gulch had really come to life now. McLean walked down the street, listening to the noise that came from the saloons. He saw Press Goodlow coming out of the cafe. The sheriff stopped when he saw McLean approaching. They passed some idle talk, and finally McLean asked, "Been wondering about that big house up there on the side of the mountain. Quite a layout, looks like."

Goodlow nodded, watching two drunken miners weaving down the street. "That's Beal Dressler's place," he said. "Cost him a lot of dinero, but then he's making plenty out of the Lost Squaw."

"No women in his life?" McLean asked.

Goodlow shook his head. "Reckon he's too busy at the mine."

He's not too busy to carry on a little affair with Rickenbaugh's girl, McLean thought as he went on down the street. He wondered if the saloonman had any idea what was going on behind his back. Evidently not, because Rickenbaugh wasn't the kind to let a thing like that progress very far.

McLean walked toward the boarding house, trying to think of some excuse for seeing Beth again. She had been on his mind ever since he first saw her. He reached the outskirts of the town and passed the livery stable which was not far from the boarding house. Suddenly the little hairs on the back of his neck were crawling and he tried to whirl away as two dark shapes leaped out of the barn toward him. He had a glimpse of an arcing gun butt. He rolled his head and the blow missed him by inches. It struck his shoulder, sending pain along his arm.

He could see them dimly now, two bearded faces, the kind you'll find in all boom camps. Belonging to men who did things like this for a price. They moved in on him again and he lashed out with both fists, driving one of them back. The other man had the gun and he tried again, gripping the

weapon by the barrel and swinging it savagely. His face was expressionless. This, McLean knew, was just another job to him. He probably would have done the same thing to his own brother, if the price was right.

McLEAN tried to duck, but the butt of the gun raked cruelly across his face and he staggered back. He went through the big double doors of the barn, stumbling over a bale of hay and landing hard on his back. There was no light in the barn and McLean rolled over and over, working his way back into the darkness. He got his feet under him and he could feel the blood running down into his eyes. He knew they were out to kill him, but they didn't want to take a chance on shooting him. It had to be a quiet job.

He kept moving back until he was against one of the stalls. He wiped the blood out of his eyes and he could vaguely see them coming through the double doors, peering into the thick darkness. One of them said, "He can't get out of here. Come on."

The other man said, "Damn it, we could sure use a lantern."

McLean crouched there, breathing heavily, a sharp, stabbing pain in his head. He couldn't see them now, but he could hear them moving forward. Back in one of the stalls a horse stamped his foot and that was the only sound. McLean's insides were tight. It was no fun waiting here in the darkness for a couple of toughs to knock your brains out.

McLean started to move along the stall and his foot became tangled in something. He bent over to free himself and his exploring fingers told him that he had stepped into a pile of harness. He ran his hand along a hard object, grinning coldly. A singletree. It was made of hard wood and he remembered one time he had seen a man use just such a weapon in a fight. The three fellows he had used it on hadn't looked very pretty when the man was done with them.

McLean crouched there, not making a sound, waiting for them to come close enough, and wondering if he would be able to stay on his feet long enough to get the job done. Blood was still running down his face and his head was splitting. He heard a man's heavy breathing and knew that they were closing in on him. He waited until one of them was close and then he swung the heavy weapon at about the spot where he figured the man's head would be. There was the sickening sound of crunching bone and the man hit the ground without a sound. His legs spread wide, McLean stood there, the singletree drawn back for another swing. They had spread out, closing in on him from two sides. But the other fellow had held back. He said in a hoarse whisper, "Slim, we got to be careful here in this dark hole. Slim. You all right?"

McLean remembered the gun then that the tough had used on him. He bent down quickly, his fingers exploring the unconscious man. The gun was still clutched in the fellow's hand. McLean straightened and squeezed a shot into the darkness. There was a surprised yell and the other man left the barn in a hurry.

McLean stuck the gun in his waistband and reeled out of the barn. He leaned against the front of the place for a minute while everything went black. Finally his head cleared a little and he remembered the boarding house. Staggering down the street, he reached the house and stumbled up the steps. The girl had enough to worry about and he guessed he wouldn't have bothered her if he had been able to think clearly. But his head was whirling crazily. He saw the front door, but he lacked the strength to reach it. He fell, hitting the porch hard, but he didn't feel it; he didn't feel a thing now.

He didn't know how long he lay

there, but he guessed it wasn't much later when Beth came out to see what the noise was. He couldn't see her very plainly, but he felt her arms around him and he knew she was trying to lift him. He struggled to his feet and let her help him inside and over to a horsehair sofa. She bathed his face and used some kind of antiseptic on the cuts. Her soft fingers caressed his cheek.

When he had rested a while he felt better. He lay there looking up at Beth Dundee. He liked what he saw and he wondered if it wouldn't be pretty nice to go on looking at her for the rest of his life.

Smiling at him, she asked, "Feel better now?"

"A lot," he muttered. "But I shouldn't have come here."

She was sitting on a chair beside the sofa and her eyes were soft. "I'm glad you came," she said.

McLEAN heard a sound at the back of the house and saw Beth turn quickly. Her eyes went wide, and following her gaze, McLean watched Cliff Dundee enter the room, a gun held loosely in his hand. He stopped and stared at his sister and McLean. Then a slow grin broke across his bearded face. "Hello," he said cheerfully.

Beth jumped up and ran across the room and into his arms. "Oh, Cliff, I'm glad to see you. But you shouldn't have come here. Their men are watching the house."

Cliff lifted her chin and gave her a reassuring smile. "They didn't see me, so stop worrying. I had to come down and see if you were all right, and I was beginning to get kind of hungry, too."

McLean sat up slowly and Cliff Dundee looked at him. "What happened to you, feller?"

McLean grinned wryly. "A couple of somebody's boys tried to work me over."

Cliff Dundee frowned. "Do they know who you are?"

McLean's face felt stiff and his head throbbed. He said, "I think they've got a pretty good idea."

Cliff looked at his sister. "Well, don't stand here," he said with a simulated gruffness. "Hustle a starved man a little grub."

Beth started toward the back of the house, but she didn't get very far. McLean saw her go rigid suddenly as a voice sounded from the front door. "Stand still, Cliff. Don't make me kill you."

McLean didn't turn his head very fast because he was afraid it might fall off his shoulders. Press Goodlow was standing in the doorway with a gun in his hand that looked, McLean thought, as big as a cannon. Cliff had holstered his weapon, but his hand was gripping the cedar butt, and for a moment, McLean thought he was going to try to shoot his way out. He looked like a coiled spring, but finally he relaxed and his breath came past his lips in a long sigh.

"It looks like you're running the show," Cliff said bitterly.

Goodlow didn't look very happy about it. He said, "I'm sorry, Cliff, but I was taking my evening stroll and saw you slip into town. I hate to lock you up, but you're gonna get yourself killed if I don't."

McLean couldn't think of anything to say—not anything that would help matters. So he kept his mouth closed until the sheriff had hustled Cliff off to jail. Then McLean sat there looking at Beth. She was leaning dejectedly against the wall, her face pale was distress. She didn't say anything. She just stood there staring bitterly at the floor.

McLean got to his feet. He wanted to say something that would comfort her, but words didn't help much at a time like this. He swallowed hard and finally he said, "Don't you worry. He won't be in jail long."

He didn't know what he was going to do to back up that statement, but he turned and went out into the night.

CHAPTER IV

While Boothill Waits

McLEAN walked back up town. Passing the livery barn, he thought of the two men who had tried to kill him, and he told himself he was going to have to do something quick, because there would be other men and the next time he might not be so lucky. The saloons were still going full blast. He walked through the puddle of lamplight in front of Turk Rickenbaugh's saloon, but he didn't stop. He heard a woman giggle, followed by a man's booming laugh. There was life in the Blue Front, he thought, but out here in the darkness there was only death.

McLean moved on, the crisp mountain air clearing his head. He passed the jail, and looking at the barred windows, his mouth tightened. He thought of Cliff and of Bob. Bob was young and he had always loved the outdoors. He wouldn't last long down there at Canon City.

McLean's eyes moved to the dark bulk of the mountain and he could see a light in Dressler's big house. His lips thin and warped, McLean's hand came up and touched the gun stuck in his waistband, and he wondered if he could force Dressler to do some talking. He decided it was worth trying. When you're desperate you're apt to take long chances.

He went swiftly along the narrow trail and the wind was making a lonesome sound through the tall pines. He reached the clearing and paused, his eyes searching the big log house. He wondered if Dressler was alone, and he wondered too if this wasn't a crazy play he was about to make. But he wasn't backing down now. He crossed the clearing, moving with caution. He tried the front door and found it unlocked. He turned the knob slowly and the heavy door opened without a sound. He slipped inside, walking quietly down a long, carpeted hall. A door stood open on his right and lamplight made a pattern on the dark-green hall carpet.

There wasn't a sound in the house. The only thing McLean could hear was his heart banging against his ribs. He slid his gun out as he neared the door and there was a queer, tight feeling in his stomach. He looked into the room and saw Dressler sitting in front of a big rock fireplace, his back to the door. The big man was hunching forward, his hands on his knees as if he was doing some serious meditating. He evidently felt sure he was alone in the house.

McLean stepped into the room and Dressler looked around. his mouth sagging open, his muddy eyes round with surprise. "What—what—are you doing here?" he asked shakily.

His face bleak, McLean kept moving toward the man. "I want to find out a few things," he said firmly.

Dressler came out of his chair and took a step toward a flat-topped desk a few feet to the right of the fireplace. There was probably a gun in one of the drawers, McLean figured. He shook his head and waved his revolver to let Dressler know he meant business. The big man stopped and he didn't look the least bit happy about this. He touched his tongue to his lips and McLean could see the sweat starting to pop out on his forehead.

McLean said tonelessly, "I want to know how a man named Dundee died; I think you know about it."

DRESSLER sat down slowly in a big arm chair and started rubbing his hands on the legs of his trousers. There wasn't much color in his face now and the sweat was running down into his eyes.

A log in the fireplace popped and

McLean felt the pull of impatience. He said sharply, "Talk, Dressler."

The big man's mouth came open, but he didn't say anything, for a window went out with a crash, glass flying all over the room. McLean started to whirl in that direction, but a cold voice stopped him, caused him to stiffen.

"Drop that gun, painter man, or you won't live another minute."

McLean didn't want to turn loose of his weapon. He didn't like the idea at all, but he decided he was in no position to argue about it. He let the pistol fall to the floor and stood there watching Turk Rickenbaugh climb through the broken window. The saloonman motioned McLean toward the desk and Dressler's breath came past his lips in a long sigh of relief. He started to get up, but Rickenbaugh pointed his gun at him and shook his head.

"Don't bother to get up, Beal. I came up here to see you. I didn't expect to find the painter here, but it doesn't matter. Just another bullet."

Dressler had started to sweat again and he was staring at Rickenbaugh wildly. "What's happened to you, Turk," he asked hoarsely. "We're partners. We're—" There was something in Rickenbaugh's eyes that caused the rest of it to stick in Dressler's throat.

Rickenbaugh's face wasn't very nice to look at. It was dark and twisted and McLean had never seen so much hate in a man's eyes. He was gripping his gun hard and he said, "I saw Sheila slip out tonight and I was waiting for her when she got back. She didn't want to tell me where she'd been, but before I was through with her she was glad to talk."

McLean saw that Dressler's eyes were wide with panic. His flabby face was jerking. "Now wait a minute, Turk. Don't do something you'll be sorry for."

Rickenbaugh shook his head slowly, a tight, contemptuous little smile on his lips. "I'll never be sorry about this, Beal, because I know what's been in your mind. If something happens to one of us, the other one gets the mine. You were about ready for something to happen to me. Then you and Sheila would have everything set up just right. But it's not going to work out that way because I'm going to send you to hell."

Dressler came half out of the chair. "No, Turk! Wait!"

But Rickenbaugh wasn't waiting. He fired twice and Dressler sat back in the chair. Not because he wanted to, but there were two bullets in him weighting him down.

McLean stood there beside the desk, a cold sick feeling in his stomach. He wished he had his gun. He could see it lying on the floor about ten feet away, but it might as well have been a mile. He could never reach it before Rickenbaugh cut him down. One hand resting on a row of books, McLean stood there beside the desk. He saw Rickenbaugh start to turn toward him and he knew he had to make his play now or never. His eyes dropped to the desk and he saw the two bronze bookends. He grabbed one of them up and flung it hard. The heavy piece of bronze struck Rickenbaugh on the left cheek, knocking him off balance, and causing the gun to wobble in his fist. Before he could get it back in line, McLean was on him and had knocked the weapon out of his hand.

SWEARING harshly, the saloonman tried to use his fists. He threw a savage right at McLean's head, but McLean ducked under it. He came up and drove a wicked left to Rickenbaugh's face. The saloonman staggered back and McLean followed him, hammering him with both fists, until Rickenbaugh was down on the floor, unable to get up, his face bloody.

(Continued on page 119)

STRING HIM UP!

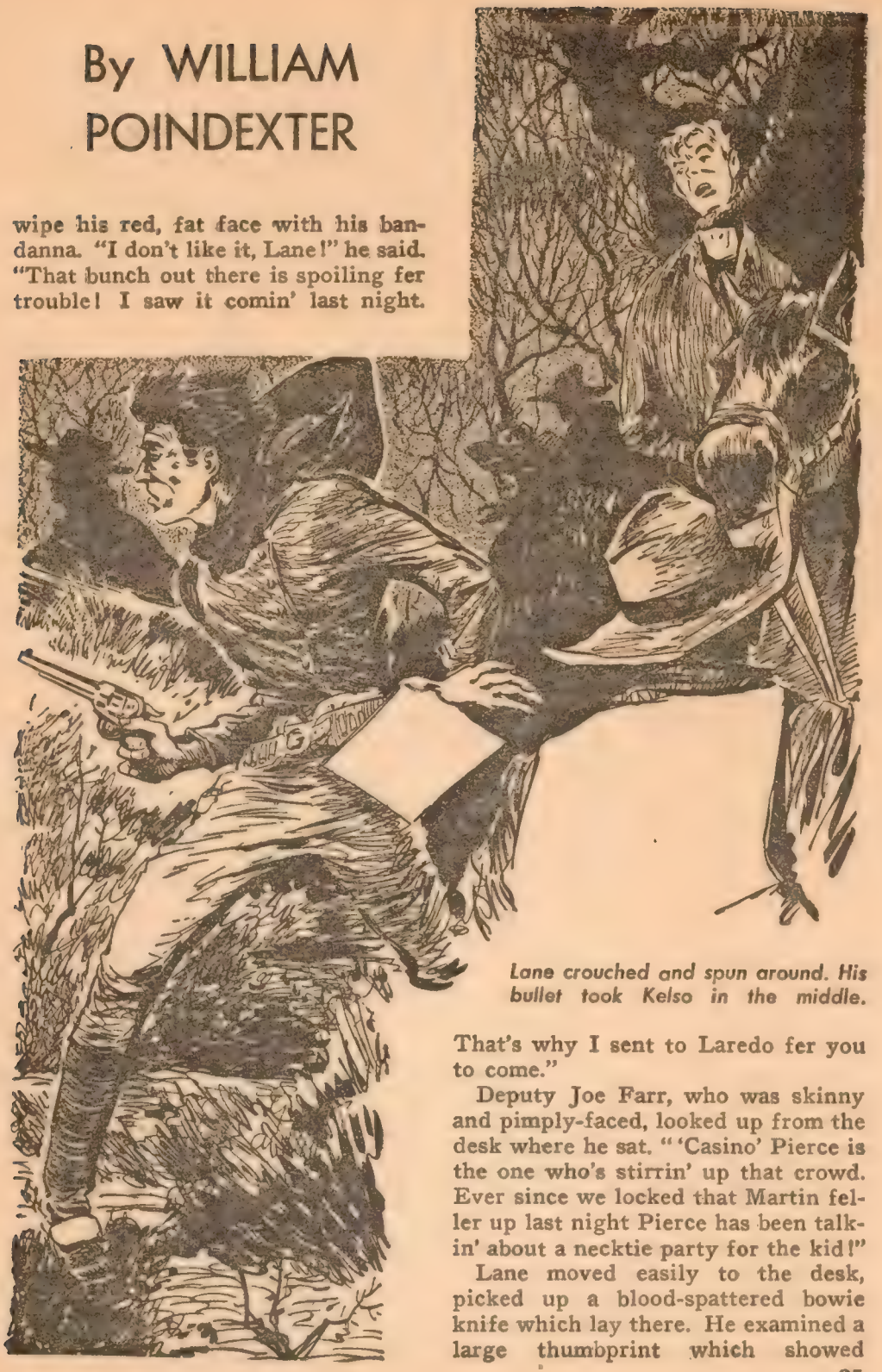
RANGER TOM LANE stared through the barred windows of the Crystal City jail. A crowd of grim-faced men stood arguing in the sparse shade offered by several box-like adobe buildings lining the dusty street. They argued not of the usual things when men gather, such as politics or the weather, but as to whether or not to take the law into their hands.

Lane turned, strode away from the window, his twinkling blue eyes watching Sheriff Ned Colin nervously pacing the floor. Colin waddled like a duck, stopping now and then to

Things looked bad for Martin as he cowered in jail with a craven sheriff. A bloodthirsty mob was gathering outside, itching to hang him. Only one man believed in his innocence, and together, they had to foil the lynching.

By WILLIAM POINDEXTER

wipe his red, fat face with his bandanna. "I don't like it, Lane!" he said. "That bunch out there is spoiling fer trouble! I saw it comin' last night.



Lane crouched and spun around. His bullet took Kelso in the middle.

That's why I sent to Laredo fer you to come."

Deputy Joe Farr, who was skinny and pimply-faced, looked up from the desk where he sat. "'Casino' Pierce is the one who's stirrin' up that crowd. Ever since we locked that Martin feller up last night Pierce has been talkin' about a necktie party for the kid!"

Lane moved easily to the desk, picked up a blood-spattered bowie knife which lay there. He examined a large thumbprint which showed

clearly on the knife-handle. "So Martin's supposed to have used this on Pierce's woman, eh? Now Pierce wants revenge for the killing by getting a mob to hang Martin." Lane reached for tobacco and papers, slowly built a smoke. "Pierce, I understand, owns the Crystal City Saloon. Right?"

"Yeah," Colin answered flatly, once more pacing the floor. "No one knows where he came from, but he drifted in a few years ago. He hung around the saloon, finally won it from old Jake Sloan. Pierce is a slick gambler judgin' by the amount of money the ranchers around here lose to him. Anyway, this good-lookin', black-haired Roma Wilson came through and Pierce gave her a job at the saloon. From then on she was his. That is, 'til Martin hit town. Roma and the kid liked each other from the start in spite of Pierce's objections. Nobody can figure why Martin killed her—maybe they had too many drinks and got in a fight. All I know is she was found in bed with that knife stuck in her! Martin was passed out, drunk, on the floor alongside her. Pierce sent fer me, wanted to hang Martin then and there, but I managed to get the kid locked up!"

Lane took a deep drag, felt the smoke bite his lungs. "What was the kid's story?"

"He claims he didn't do it, but he's lyin," Colin said "Too many things point to him!"

Lane's good-humored mouth split in a grin. "So you're ready to convict Martin! Well, we'll see. Maybe I'll agree with you after I've heard his story." Lane headed for the adjoining room where the cells were located.

SUDDENLY hammer-like blows echoed through the room from the direction of the front door. Lane halted, his long body tense, hands poised above the Colt six-shooters which were strapped to his sides. "See who it is and what he wants, Colin," he said quietly.

Colin shot Lane an anxious look, then plodded to the door drawing his six-shooter as he went. "Who's there!" he cried.

"Pierce and Kelso!" came the muffled reply. "Let us in—we want to talk."

"Let 'em in, Colin," Lane said quickly. "But keep them covered."

Colin admitted the two men. A multitude of loud, raucous cries came from the crowd which now milled before the jail. Colin quickly shut and bolted the door. He spoke: "All right, Pierce. What do you want?"

"Casino" Pierce's small frame was immaculate in string bowtie, long-tailed coat, and polished boots. His mouth was a thin line in his stony face. His gray eyes were cold and arrogant as he said, "I've come to give you a little warning. You'd be smart to turn that killer over to us. The boys outside are getting restless!"

Lane turned his attention to Blix Kelso, who lounged against the far wall. Kelso was well built, had a bullet-shaped head, low forehead, and a squashed nose. His eyes, insolently watching Lane, were small and mean. At his sides, strapped low, were two notched guns. Lane knew Kelso for what he was—a paid gunman, a killer. Lane had often met this type up and down the State. Lane said, "I'm right sorry to disappoint you, Pierce, but that kid stays where he is!"

"You're a fool if you think we can't take Martin anytime we want, Ranger!" Pierce said loftily.

Sheriff Colin waddled over. "Listen, Pierce. We don't want no more trouble than we got now! You're the cause of that mob bein' out there. I heard you was feedin' everybody whiskey last night and rilin' them up over this killin'!"

Pierce's face darkened. "Shut your fat mouth, Colin! Remember, I'm the one who helped elect you to office."

Pierce turned to Lane. "I'm not the one who's pushing that crowd. They all liked the girl. She was good to them when they came to the saloon. Now they want to see that justice is done. Martin's got to pay for the killing!"

"I'm here for one reason, Pierce. To protect that kid!" Lane said coldly. "And I mean to see him delivered over to the courts for a fair trial. Good Lord, man, everyone is entitled to that much regardless of what he's done! Now, Pierce, go out there and tell those people to go home and let the law take its course."

"Law take its course, *hell!*" Pierce sneered. "While we sit around for months waiting for something to happen! No, Martin's not going to court to be turned loose!"

Lane's voice rang out. "That's all, Pierce! I've had my say—now get out! And when you go tell that bunch that the first one who tries to break in the jail gets a dose of lead!"

Pierce's eyes blazed. "You poor fools! I tried to make you listen to reason. From now on, look after your own skins!" He turned, walked to the door. "Get this door open, Colin! Quick!"

COLIN let the two men out, returned to sink heavily into a chair adjacent the desk. "Lane," he said thinly, "maybe we're makin' a mistake. Maybe we better turn the kid over to them. We can't stand that mob off. We'll be killed!"

"The sheriff's right, Lane," chimed in Farr. He sat nervously popping his knuckles for a moment. Then he said, "I sure didn't mean to fight no mob when I hired out as deputy!"

Lane started a sharp reply, then checked it. No use to get angry with this pair. Maybe they didn't share his feelings. Lane knew he could never turn Martin over to the mob. If he did, he'd be failing his duty as a Ranger. Lane's father, also a Ranger who had died during the Civil War when Lane was but a lad, had taught Lane the value of loyalty to the Ranger Service. Now, twenty years later, it was Lane's ambition to make captain of a Ranger company. Finally Lane said, "Men, I guess I'm too stubborn to give in to Pierce and his gang. I hope you didn't mean what you said. If you don't mind, I'll forget all about it!" Lane walked toward the room which held Martin. "I'm going in and listen to Martin's story," he said curtly. "Call me if you need me."

Getting Martin's story proved harder than Lane figured. Martin, a bewildered look in his soft brown eyes, slumped dejectedly at one end of the bunk which was the tiny cell's only piece of furniture. An hour had passed since Lane had first started questioning the kid, and in that hour Lane had come to believe in Martin's innocence. True, he'd had to drag the answers from Martin, but only because Martin'd lost all hope of clearing himself. Martin's story proved one thing—that anyone could have killed Roma Wilson and easily arranged for the blame to fall on Martin.

When Lane was satisfied Martin was through talking, he said, "Martin, I believe your story and I'm going to try to help you. Any boy with your history could have made the same mistake!" Lane rose from the bed, watched Martin's clean-cut features brighten.

Martin jumped up. As he extended his hand his tattered sleeve dangled loosely. "Thanks, Lane! It helps to know *someone* believes in me!"

Lane shook hands, laughed as Martin tried to tuck in the flopping sleeve. "Looks like I'll have to get you one of my shirts." Then Lane sobered. "There's one more thing I want to do. I'll be right back."

Lane left the cell, walked to a table which held a lantern. He lit it, adjusted the wick so it would smoke,

then took a sheet of paper from his pocket and held it above the flame. If this worked he'd have definite proof of Martin's innocence. He felt a tug at his heart as once more his mind darted back to Martin's story. The kid must have had a hard time! Martin had come from San Antonio where only recently he'd learned he was an orphan. Not wanting to be a further burden on his foster parents who were poor, the kid had run away from the farm in hopes of making good on some ranch. He'd arrived at Crystal City broke and hungry, gone to the saloon where he met Roma, received food and drink. Martin, unable to find work immediately, had stayed around the saloon. On the night of the murder Roma had been feeding Martin in a back room when Pierce burst in, ordered Roma to get rid of Martin. Roma said she was sick of Pierce ordering her around, threatened to tell all the ranchers that Pierce was running a crooked game unless he left her alone. Pierce had been furious. He'd sent Roma upstairs, then returned, offered to buy Martin a drink before the kid left to show there were no hard feelings between the two of them. Martin had accepted and that was the last he remembered, for when he'd awakened he was lying in Roma's room with Sheriff Colin's handcuffs on him.

Lane inspected the paper. He grunted in satisfaction when he saw it was black with carbon on one side.

Returning to the cell Lane said, "Hold your right thumb out, Martin."

The kid obeyed, a puzzled frown on his face. Lane pressed Martin's thumb on each side of the paper. Then he said, "This may save your life, kid. Who knows."

LANE went into the next room. Colin sat at his desk reading dodgers with a large magnifying glass. Farr sat nearby oiling his pistol. "I didn't know your eyes were weak, Colin," Lane said.

Colin looked up. "Yeah. I was just goin' through these to see if Martin is wanted fer anything else."

"Let me see that glass a moment, will you, Colin?" Lane asked eagerly. He stepped over, picked up the knife, took the lens from Colin. Then he moved to where the sunlight streamed through a window. He held his breath as he compared the thumbprints on the knife and the paper. There was a similarity, but the print on the knife was much smaller, the tiny whorls of the skin different. No, the prints weren't made by the same man—Martin was innocent!

Lane moved the lens, let the sun's rays shine through it upon the paper.

Colin waddled over, took the knife from Lane and examined it. Then he asked, "What are you doin', Lane? Why, that paper's on fire! The sun comin' through that glass lit it!"

Lane nodded. He pinched out the fire. "Colin," he said grimly, "we've got to protect Martin. He's no more guilty than you or me. We've got to look somewhere else for our killer!"

Colin's mouth plopped open. "How can you know so much? You just got here this morning and you ain't been out of the buildin'!"

Suddenly there was a loud splintering of glass as a rock hurtled through the nearby window. It struck Lane a glancing blow on his head, sent his Stetson flying to the floor. They heard the roar of the crowd, low at first, then rising higher and higher as other rocks crashed against the building. The mob's temper was rising.

"Pierce's got them stirred up again!" Colin burst out. "What th' hell are we goin' to do!"

Lane stuffed the paper and lens in his back pocket, slowly picked up his hat. He turned and strode grimly toward the front door. "You and Farr keep me covered," he said. "I'll see if I can talk some sense into them!"

He heard the crack of a rifle, and the ground seemed to come up to meet him as he swayed off his horse.

"Wait, Lane!" Colin sputtered. "You ain't goin' out *there!*"

"We can't stand here while they tear down the jail!" Lane said. "Have this door locked the minute I'm outside, Colin!"

Loud cries greeted Lane the minute he stepped out, hoots and curses as the crowd pressed closer. Finally a space of only a few yards separated Lane from the first row of men. Someone screamed, "To hell with the Ranger!" Another, "String him up with Martin! We don't need no Ranger to tell us what to do!"

Lane's eardrums throbbed under the din of screaming voices. As he looked fixedly into the sea of distorted faces he compared the men to a pack of savage wolves lusting after the kill. Lane, sickened at the sight of them, tried to locate Pierce, the man he knew to be the firebrand. The crowd, of around fifty men, was an unkempt lot—not typical of the citizenry of Crystal City. It was the saloon crowd —Pierce's crowd—there at Pierce's bidding for whatever favors Pierce chose to bestow. Strange, man's lack of reasoning power when caught in the whirlpool of mob violence!

Lane's voice suddenly cracked like a whip over the crowd—startling it, silencing it for a moment. "Men!" Lane shouted. "Go home! You've got no business here. Let the law handle Martin!"

THE crowd roared, but again Lane silenced it. Eyes steady, voice level, he said, "There's not a one of you who'd try alone to hang that kid! You're all excited because you're together. A mob is a cowardly thing, but I don't believe you men are cowards!"

The crowd hooted. It surged forward.

"Don't be fools!" Lane warned coldly. "To get in this jail you'll have to pass me!" He drew his six-guns. "I'm going to count three and start shooting. Now—*Scatter!*"

The crowd stopped. Was Lane bluffing?

Lane started counting. Slowly, sullenly, the crowd fell back, scattered—until Lane stood alone!

Lane resolved then to move his prisoner as soon as possible. He sensed that victory was only temporary. The mob would return, spurred by the lashing of Pierce's tongue, crazed by Pierce's whiskey. Lane had

to know more about Pierce! Was the little gambler really seeking revenge on Martin for killing Roma, or did Pierce have something to do with the killing and was letting the crime be pinned on Martin?

Later, in the jail, after Deputy Farr had gone for food and they had eaten, Lane packed two saddle bags with blankets, tobacco, tins of meat, cornmeal, and canteens filled with water —enough supplies to last several days. Then Lane sent Farr to the livery stable for horses. Lane planned to go to Laredo, a half-day's ride, but if Pierce's men followed, Lane and Martin would have to hide in the brush until things quieted. It was their only chance.

Lane brought the saddle bags to the back door where Colin stood anxiously watching for Farr's return. "I'll have to borrow some of your guns, Colin," Lane said. "A couple of rifles and a pistol for Martin. I want the kid to have a fighting chance in case we run into trouble!"

Just then they heard the *clip-clop* of hooves as Farr rode up to the rear of the jail leading an ugly mustang. Farr dismounted and ran to the door, his pimply face pale wtih fright in the afternoon sun. "Some of Pierce's men saw me gettin' the hosses!" he said. "If you aim to leave you better get goin'!"

"Quick, Colin!" Lane snapped. "Get those guns while I'm turning Martin loose!" Lane leaped toward the prisoner's cell.

The kid leaped up from the bunk when Lane's key rattled in the lock. "I'm having to move you to a safer place, Martin," Lane explained as he swung the door open. "Pierce and his bunch want to hang you. So you do what I tell you and follow me."

Lane took the guns from the waiting Colin. He thrust a Winchester carbine into Martin's hands, kept one. Then he jammed a Colt .45 into the belt of Martin's pants, saying, "I don't know if you can use this, kid, but you sure better learn!"

Lane pushed Martin toward Farr, who had already tied on their saddle bags, stood holding their fidgeting mounts. They mounted.

Lane spurred his mustang alongside Martin's big bay. "Stick close to me, Martin. This brush country is tricky! I can't have you lost!" Then Lane waved to Colin and Farr, kicked his mount's flanks.

They headed south across a stretch of prairie, following a beaten trail which would soon carry them into the brush country.

Something buzzed like a hornet past Lane's ear, then he heard the *crack* of a rifle as the sound caught up with him. He glanced back, beyond Martin, who leaned forward, his head bent alongside his mount's flying mane.

A HALF-MILE to the rear came a group of riders desperately quirting their horses. Lane could see the sun glint on a rifle barrel as one pursuer took aim and fired another shot. They hadn't wasted any time in giving chase once they'd discovered Lane's plan to escape!

Abruptly the prairie faded and the trail writhed through large clumps of chaparral and waist-high barrel-cacti. Occasionally a stunted mesquite tree flashed by, its branches barren and twisted. The country was wild, but no wilder than the things which lived there: the deer, the panther, the coyote, the wildcat, and the razor-back hog. Little wonder that men who ventured alone into this vast jungle of brush sometimes failed to return.

Another bullet hummed past. Lane wondered how long it would take before the pursuers got in a lucky shot. Should he stand and fight, let the kid go on while he held them off? No, that wouldn't work. Even if Martin didn't get lost Lane would have no

guarantee that the kid would turn himself over to the law. Lane couldn't take that chance. Martin was a prisoner until his innocence could be established.

Suddenly Lane's head snapped forward. His brain seemed to explode as sharp waves of pain surged through it. The world spun before his eyes, his arms and legs turned to jelly. Vaguely, above the roaring in his ears, he heard the belated *crack* of a rifle. Lane clutched desperately at the saddle-horn as nausea rocked his stomach. A wry grin came to his lips. He realized dimly that he'd been hit by a lucky shot. Martin would have to go on alone now. Lane swayed to one side, saw the ground swell to meet him—then blackness.

Lane awoke with his head throbbing as though squeezed in a giant vise. He lay on his back gulping in air, fighting the dizziness which threatened to engulf him. He squinted against the sun, tried to focus his eyes on two low-flying turkey buzzards. He rolled over slowly, tried to rise. It was no use. His hands were behind him as tightly bound as were his feet.

Lane rested a moment, cursing silently. Pierce's gang had done a good job on him! Where were they now? Had they caught Martin? Lane feared they had because the gang wouldn't have given up the chase just to tie Lane up.

Lane struggled with the ropes, managed to sit up. His eyes searched the ground for a stick, a sharp rock, anything with which to free himself. Hearing a soft whinny, Lane's body tensed. Almost hidden behind a nearby clump of chaparral stood Lane's mustang, the reins trailing loosely from its mallet head. "Good boy!" Lane said happily. "I reckon they were in too big a hurry to worry about catching you!"

Lane began to slide across the ground. If he could reach the waiting mustang maybe he could somehow pull himself into the saddle. Suddenly Lane lost his balance and toppled over—and something dropped from his back pocket.

Unmindful of the renewed throbbing in his head, Lane sat up, saw Colin's magnifying glass near his feet glistening in the sun. He watched it intently while his mind worked rapidly. The glass—there was something about it he was trying to remember. Then he had it! The burning paper in Colin's office! If the sun's rays could be made to burn paper by centering them through the lens, why not rope?

Eagerly Lane set to work gouging a hole in the earth with his finger. Then he crawfished around, picked up the lens, scooted back. He turned his back, rammed the handle of the lens into the hole so that the lens would be at the right height to receive the sun's rays.

Lane held his wrists near the lens and waited. Immediately he felt heat on his skin. He changed positions. Again he waited. This time the acrid smell of smoke stung his nostrils. The rope was burning! Lane gritted his teeth, sat still. He knew he would get loose, but it would take time, time he needed badly if he was to reach Crystal City in time to save Martin from stretching rope!

WHEN Lane reached Crystal City he chose a back street in reaching the jail. Both Colin and Farr came to admit him. Colin started the bandanna to mopping his beefy face. "We was plumb worried about you, Lane," Colin said. Then he noticed Lane's head. "Good Lord, man! There's blood all over the back of your head!"

"Never mind that," Lane said grimly. "It's only a crease. What about Pierce? Are his men back?"

Colin's eyes shifted. Farr turned his back and Lane could hear him

cracking his knuckles. "Speak up, Colin!" Lane said.

Colin cleared his throat. "They—they rode in a little while ago—headed fer the saloon."

Lane seized Colin by the shirt-front, pulled the fat sheriff close. "Was Martin with them?"

"Yeah," Colin said dully.

"Then what are you two doing here! You'd let Pierce string that kid up without even *trying* to stop him!" Lane released Colin. He tore Colin's six-gun from the sheriff's side. "You won't be needing this. I'm borrowing it for a while."

Lane ran through the office and grabbed the blood-stained knife from the desk. He stopped at the front door. "You two whining coyotes better hope I'm not too late to save Martin," he said darkly, wrenching open the door and going hurriedly out.

A crowd was gathered at the far end of the street where, adjacent the Crystal City Saloon, a tall liveoak sheltered an oblong watering-trough. Several men sat their mounts, and among them Lane recognized the slumped figure of Martin. His hands were tied behind his back, a lariat trailed from his neck. Lane could see the flat-nosed Kelso up in the liveoak tying the other end of the lariat to a limb where all it would take to hang Martin would be to scare his mount from beneath him.

Pressing his way through the crowd which was strangely quiet now that the hanging was to occur, Lane heard "Casino" Pierce's cold voice say: "Do you want a blindfold, Martin? You know, we want to make it easy on you!"

Martin jerked erect. He clamped bloodless lips as he stared fixedly ahead.

NO ONE noticed as Lane eased through the crowd. Soon he was beneath the tree where he could see Pierce for the first time standing in a circle of men. Pierce, his thin lips twisted in a grin, watched Martin narrowly. Lane felt his blood boil as he realized that Pierce was enjoying every minute of Martin's agony.

"All finished!" Kelso called out. "Hold it, I'm comin' down."

While Kelso crawled out of the tree, Pierce asked, "You got any last words, Martin!"

Silence.

Lane suddenly stepped forward. "I've got something to say, Pierce! Martin's not hanging! He's innocent and I've got the proof!"

Martin's eyes glowed. "Thank God! Lane!"

Lane touched the butt of his Colt as one of Pierce's men nearby cursed, started to go for his gun. "Hold it!" Lane warned, his eyes sweeping the crowd.

Pierce's face darkened. He looked at Kelso. "You sure took care of this Ranger, Kelso! I should've done the job myself!" Pierce turned to the crowd. "Don't let this man bluff you! Let's go ahead with the hanging. He's got no proof. Martin's guilty as hell! We all know that!"

The crowd let out a yell, closed in on Lane.

Lane's heart pumped wildly as he stood his ground. As if by magic his Colt appeared in his hand. He knew one false move, one sign of weakness, would finish him and Martin.

The crowd halted, became silent. There was something about this Ranger which was awe inspiring—either the look of fierce determination on Lane's face or his utter disregard for his safety.

Lane finally spoke. "I said I had proof and here it is!" He held up the smoked paper, the knife. "On this paper is a thumbprint which I took from Martin. On the murder weapon is the killer's thumbprint. Now I want any three men to step forward and compare these prints!"

Three men obeyed. The last one, a

skinny, bearded man, sheepishly scratched his head. "I reckon we was mistaken. Them prints ain't the same." He raised his voice. "Men, Martin ain't guilty. He didn't kill the gal. Somebody cut the rope off'n that kid!"

Pierce shoved one of his men aside, began to furtively edge into the crowd.

"Wait, Pierce!" Lane said sharply. "You've played such a big part in this mess I was just wondering what you had at stake. Martin told me some mighty interesting things which happened right before Roma was killed. For instance, that you gave Martin a drink and right after that he passed out. You didn't dope Martin's drink, kill the girl, then put Martin in her room so the blame would fall on him, *did you, Pierce?*"

"No!" Pierce shouted. A muscle in his cheek twitched. "I loved her. That's why I was after Martin's hide. I thought he killed her. If he didn't then I don't know who did! Tell me, would I have killed her when I loved her?"

"Maybe," Lane said coldly. "Maybe you killed her because you were jealous of the way she was treating Martin. Or—"

Pierce sneered. "That won't work, Ranger! She acted that way with everybody who came in the saloon."

"—Or you killed her for some other reason," Lane continued.

"Where's your proof!" Pierce said.

Lane strode over, held out the smoked paper to Pierce. "If you're innocent I'll soon know it! Make me a print of your right thumb!"

Pierce's eyes shifted uneasily. He hesitated, as though trying to figure a way out, then slowly reached for the paper. He pressed his thumb to both sides, thrust the paper at Lane.

Lane looked at it carefully. Then, eyes flashing, he said, "Pierce, I arrest you for the murder of Roma Wilson!"

Just then Martin cried, "Lane! Watch out! Kelso!"

A GUN roared, its sound crashing against Lane's eardrums. Something clawed, seared its way along Lane's side. Instinctively, Lane spun, crouched. He triggered his .45 Colt in the direction of the sound. His bullet took Kelso in the middle, just above his gun-belt. Kelso's eyes widened. Tight lines began forming in his face. Kelso dropped his gun, his knees sagged, and he collapsed like a rag doll to the ground.

Lane turned quickly, saw Pierce sneak a little Derringer pistol from beneath his coat. "Don't try it, Pierce!" Lane snapped.

Pierce sneered, whipped up the Derringer, fired.

Once more Lane's gun sang out. Pierce dropped his pistol, his arm useless, broken by the force of Lane's bullet. Pierce cursed savagely as Lane approached him. "You were a fool to try that, Pierce," Lane said. "The same to kill that girl. You didn't love her, Pierce. You hated her!"

"Yes, damn her!" Pierce spat. "She was all right until she got too friendly with Martin. She knew I was running a crooked game, taking the ranchers' money. She threatened, in front of Martin, to tell everybody in town about it. I knew I had to shut her up and I did! But Martin knew about it then, and I had to do something to make sure he didn't talk. So I pinned the murder on him."

Lane shook his head sadly. "The law'll see to it that you take the place that you had picked out for Martin—at the end of a rope!"

LARIAT LUCY
FLAMING JUSTICE
HELP! HELP!
CATTLE RUSTLERS HAD THE RANCHERS PLENTY BURNED UP, AND WERE MAKING IT HOT FOR LARIAT LUCY'S FATHER, SHERIFF LANG. BUT THEY WERE PLAYING WITH FIRE, AND WERE BROUGHT TO FLAMING JUSTICE
LARIAT LUCY AND HER BOYFRIEND, JIM HOWELL, ARE ON THEIR WAY TO THE COUNTY JAIL TO SEE SHERIFF LANG.
RUSTLERS ARE STEALING CATTLE FROM NEARLY ALL THE RANCHERS IN THE COUNTY, JIM.... DAD SURE HAS A TOUGH JOB!
WISH I COULD HELP HIM, LUCY... HERE COMES HORACE BOSCOE. I DON'T LIKE THE WAY THAT MORON LOOKS AT YOU!
HE DOESN'T BOTHER ME, JIM. HE'S NOT NORMAL... I DON'T FEAR HIM... HE'S HARMLESS!

HI, DAD.
H'LO SHERIFF. ...GOT A LEAD ON THE RUSTLERS?
YEAH, JIM. ONE HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED BY SEVERAL RANCHERS. ...BUT I CAN'T LOCATE HIM!...IT'S PETE MILLER
I NEED HELP, JIM! I'M SWEARING YOU IN AS DEPUTY SHERIFF. HERE'S YOUR BADGE.
THANKS, SHERIFF LANG. I WAS HOPING YOU'D LET ME TRY TO TRACK DOWN THE GANG.
WITH YOU WORKING TOGETHER, THE CATTLE THIEVES HAVEN'T GOT A CHANCE!
WANTED
SEVERAL DAYS LATER AS JIM RIDES THE RANGE.
WHAT TH'? -MUST BE ONE OF THE RUSTLERS! GOT TO CATCH HIM!
BANG!
BANG!
BANG
BANG
THE ASSAILANT'S LAST SHOT IS FIRED. JIM SPURS HIS HORSE.
IT'S PETE MILLER! I'LL GET HIM!
2

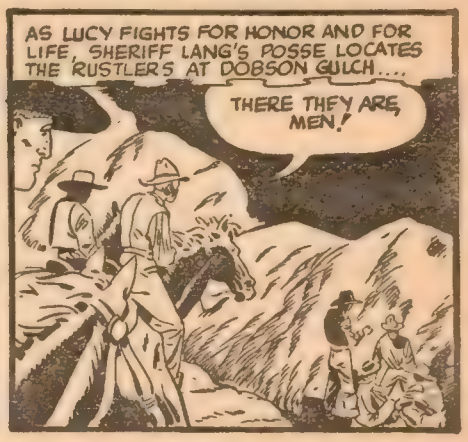
SOCK!
WHAM!
TAKE THAT!
UGH!
JIM TAKES THE RUSTLER TO JAIL....LATER...
DON'T BE A FOOL, MILLER! YOU'LL HANG! NAME THE REST OF THE RUSTLERS AND SAVE YOUR NECK!
YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME, SHERIFF. I WON'T TALK!
3.
MEANWHILE, LUCY IS ALSO TRYING TO FIND THE CATTLE THIEVES. SHE TRIES TO GET INFORMATION FROM ONE OF THE RANCHERS WHO IDENTIFIED PETE MILLER....
LOOK...YOUR BARN IS ON FIRE!
ALL HANDS TURN OUT TO FIGHT THE BLAZE
IT'S TOO LATE, LUCY! WE CAN'T SAVE THE BARN!
COME ON! WE'VE GOT TO GET THE HORSES OUT!

WHAT COULD HAVE STARTED THE FIRE?
I DON'T KNOW, LUCY. BUT IT'S A BIG LOSS TO ME!
SEVERAL DAYS LATER, AT SHERIFF LANG'S RANCH...
A FIREBUG MUST BE LOOSE. TWO MORE BARNS HAVE BURNED TO THE GROUND.
ALL THREE BELONGED TO MEN WHO IDENTIFIED MILLER.
THE RUSTLERS MUST BE RESPONSIBLE!
MAYBE THEY'RE TRYING TO INTIMIDATE THE RANCHERS SO THEY WON'T TESTIFY AGAINST THE RUSTLERS, SHERIFF?
OR ELSE THEY'RE HOPING TO MAKE IT HOT FOR US, JIM. WE CAN LOSE OUR BADGES IF WE DON'T STOP THE THIEVING AND BURNING.
LET'S GET BACK TO THE COUNTY JAIL, JIM, AND MAKE THE RUSTLER TALK!
BYE, LUCY.
GOOD LUCK.
LATER...
O.K., SHERIFF, O.K...I'LL TALK! THE HIDEOUT IS AT DOBSON GULCH. YOU'LL FIND THE CATTLE THERE, TOO.
IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU OPENED UP, MILLER!
LOCK HIM UP, JIM. I'M GOING OUT TO ROUND UP A POSSE.
WANTED
MEANWHILE...AT THE LANG RANCH
OHH! SOMEONE IS SETTING FIRE TO OUR BARN!
4.

IT'S HORACE BOSCOE!
YEAH, LUCY. AND NOW I GOT YOU WHERE I WANTCHA!

GIMME A KISS, LUCY.
LET ME GO, YOU BIG APE!

KEEP AWAY FROM ME, HORACE!
HELP! HELP!


AS LUCY FIGHTS FOR HONOR AND FOR LIFE, SHERIFF LANG'S POSSE LOCATES THE RUSTLERS AT DOBSON GULCH...
THERE THEY ARE, MEN!

YOU WON'T GET US, SHERIFF!
THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK, RUSTLER!
UGH!
BANG!
BANG!
BANG!
5.

SHERIFF LANG AND HIS MEN SUBDUE THE CATTLE THIEVES
PICK UP THEIR GUNS, JIM. LET'S GET THEM OFF TO JAIL!

BACK IN THE BLAZING BARN, LUCY REALIZES THE FIREBUG IS PARTLY INSANE. SHE DECIDES TO USE PSYCHOLOGY...
HORACE, I DON'T WANT TO BURN ALIVE! ...I'LL...I'LL GIVE YOU ALL THE KISSES YOU WANT IF YOU'LL LET ME OUT OF HERE.
YOU WILL, LUCY? GEE!
YES, HORACE ..I'LL EVEN GO OUT WITH YOU TO SET FIRES.....
O.K., LUCY. WE'LL GO....BUT YOU'D BETTER MEAN WHAT YOU SAY!
THEY TRY TO ESCAPE...
WE CAN'T GET OUT, LUCY! THE BARN DOOR'S BURNING!
THE FLAMES HAVEN'T REACHED THE LOFT YET, HORACE. THERE'S A WINDOW UP THERE. IF WE CAN MAKE IT, WE CAN LEAP TO SAFETY!
WE CAN'T GET UP, LUCY. THE LADDER'S BURNING!
THERE'S A ROPE, HORACE! I'LL MAKE A LARIAT, AND...
TRY TO LASSO THAT PEG.!

THE ROPE WRAPS AROUND THE PEG AND HOLDS....
WHEN I REACH THE LOFT, YOU CLIMB UP. WE'LL GET OUT OF THIS INFERNO, HORACE!
HURRY, LUCY!
HORACE, CLIMB UP BEFORE YOU BURN TO DEATH!
I'M COMING, LUCY!
THE ROPE'S BURNING. I CAN'T MAKE IT!
I DON'T WANT TO DIE! HE-E-E-E LLP!
SNAP!
HORACE! OHHH, NO!
I CAN'T STAY HERE, OR I'LL BE BURNED ALIVE, TOO.. ..I MUST GET TO THE WINDOW!
HOPE I CAN GET THERE IN TIME!

LOOK, SHERIFF! IT'S LUCY!
GOOD LORD!
I MADE IT! THANK HEAVENS!
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, LUCY DARLING?
YES, JIM. BUT HORACE BOSCOE IS INSIDE! HE'S THE FIREBUG, NOT THE RUSTLERS!
IT'S TOO LATE, LUCY! WE CAN'T SAVE HIM NOW.
POOR HORACE!
DON'T TAKE IT SO HARD, LUCY. HE'S PROBABLY BETTER OFF NOW.
NOW THAT WE HAVE ROUNDED UP THE RUSTLERS AND THE FIREBUG'S DEAD, WE CAN ALL REST EASY!
The End

She Cheated the Hangman

By CARL KENT

JOHNNY REDFIELD was miserable. Riding in the cramped quarters of the Apache Stage Coach with a lawman and a pretty girl, who wouldn't even speak to him, added to his discomfort.

His lean body was stiff and sore from the inactivity provided by the wrist bracelets and the heavy leg irons. If he moved, even a little, it

The sheriff was taking Johnny to Apache, where he faced a hangman's noose. But on the way, when the stage was attacked, the lawman turned his gun over to Johnny, and what happened after that changed the entire future.

meant disturbing the other two passengers.

The man asleep beside him wore the five-point star of a sheriff. Johnny's full lips twitched slightly. It wouldn't be healthy to arouse Dave Jones suddenly. The sheriff had snuggled the business end of a six-gun real close to Johnny's ribs, before dozing off.

Dave Jones was an old man and hadn't slept much on the three-day trek back to Apache. But, this last night had been too much and Dave had drifted off to sleep.

Redfield's eyes traveled from Dave's tired, wrinkled face, across the coach to the other passenger. She was a well-formed girl. About nineteen, she

When one of the raiders came within close range, Johnny blasted the saddle empty.

figured. Her soft, clear face reflected aggravation at each jolt of the rolling, rumbling stage.

Johnny's broad face was drawn as he watched her. Jane Mason would have married the man he shot. She

had been there when it happened.

Now, she was riding the stage back to Apache and would testify as the only witness against him. Her testimony would send him to the hangman's platform and a date with death. All through the long trip, these things hung between them like an opaque fog. Johnny shivered in the shoulders, as if trying to shed his dark feeling.

He moved his brown eyes toward the window and watched the endless arid wastelands of the Arizona desert pass by.

The merciless sun was giving way to the twilight and had descended just behind the mountains, tinting the clear, cobalt sky with splashes of crimson and saffron yellow.

The giant Saguaro cactus posed as grotesque shadows, prickly faces to the sky, watching as the ashen hued owls came awake to begin their nightly marauding.

Johnny felt no remorse. Even now, as he imagined the noose on his neck, still it had been a job well done.

Bert Cashman had paid the price for cheating and stealing. Johnny's gun-crippled brother had lost his stock and spread to Cashman's rustlers. His soul had burned for retribution.

As Jane had boarded the stage in Butte City, trim and sweet smelling, he wished though, they could have met under different circumstances.

Johnny wondered what his reaction would have been, had he known that she was in Bert's house that night. He was certain that if she knew the truth, she'd understand. He longed for her to smile warmly on him instead of looking through him.

THE high wheeled coach groaned over the top of the mesa, swayed to the right and he knew they were on the right fork and would be in Hondo soon, a stage stop for fresh horses.

He spoke hesitantly, "We'll be stoppin' for a while in Hondo, m'am, you can rest a little." She acted as if she hadn't heard and continued to stare into the night. He didn't know why, but he tried again. "We should be pulling into Apache near noon tomorrow and the tough going'll be over." Jane didn't turn from the window as she answered, "I'm well aware of our arrival time in Apache. You see, I've made the trip before, or had you forgotten." Her words carried a cruel bite that made Johnny's jaw muscles ripple and he swallowed hard. He couldn't explain.

Sinking back into the cushion again he watched as the protesting stage made it's way down the main street past dark wooden-faced buildings. Here and there a saloon was lit up and as they went by, the raucous music and laughter hung giddily in the close night air. Johnny thought how great it was to be free.

As they jolted to a stop in front of the Diamond Hotel, the driver clambered off the box, hurried around and opened the door. He spoke to Jane. "We'll be here about thirty minutes, m'am, you kin git some grub at the hotel." She nodded, stepped lightly from the coach, smoothed her skirts and walked briskly toward the well-worn hostelry.

The driver poked his head in the door at Johnny and the white-haired sheriff. "Ol' Dave's takin' a snooze, huh?" he observed and started to shake the older man, but Johnny interrupted in time:

"Would you mind movin' that .44 out of my side-meat first?" A smile flickered across the driver's beard-stubbled face and he moved the menacing gun muzzle slowly out of range.

The grizzled old lawman came awake with a smile and yawned broadly. He was thinking that if his prisoner would try to escape it would happen somewhere just outside of Hondo. This was familiar country and Johnny Redfield had plenty of

friends he could hide out with. In fact, the old man figured Johnny a fool, if he didn't try to break, because his conviction was almost certain if he rode it out to Apache and stood trial.

The sheriff was standing on the ground stretching himself.

"Want to amble over for a bite to eat, boy?" Johnny shook his head. He was hungry, but the thought of facing Jane in the cafe and enduring her accusing stare, killed all pangs of hunger. Then, he thought of the road-weary man who couldn't leave his prisoner.

"I will have a cup of coffee with you, though." The sheriff smiled and answered, "Oh, I guess not." Then he said, "Johnny, if I hadn't of caught up with you the other day, it would have been too late." He sighed and pushed his hat back from habit.

"Yes, sir, I was just plumb tuckered out, couldn't a gone much longer."

"You'll be all right when you get back home and rest up, Dave."

"Want a smoke, kid?" Dave was offering the makins'.

"No, I guess not, can't get my mind on it."

The old sheriff leaned against the side of the coach and mused:

"Johnny, I hate this job I'm doin'. It wouldn't be so bad if there was one mite of evidence that would help you during the trial. That little girl's testimony about hearin' you argue with Cashman and then the shots. Johnny, nobody actually seen you, not even her, but you ain't once put up any defense for yourself."

"Look, Dave, I killed Bert Cashman." Johnny's voice was cool and rational. "I'd do it again. Maybe had I known that she was inside the house, it would have changed my plans, but sooner or later, Dave, Bert Cashman had to drop with my bullet in his belly." Johnny's eyes flashed as he went on, "He'd been after my brother's ranch for a long time and when Jim wouldn't sell Cashman's gunslicks dropped him one day while he was ridin' fence. Crippled him up and put him in bed. Cashman killed my brother!" The sheriff was concentrating on the toe of his boot as Johnny finished, "So, I hunted him down, gave him a chance to draw and killed him!"

The two men watched in silence as the hostler led a fresh hitch of bays toward the coach from the station corral.

JANE MASON crossed the dusty street and came up to the waiting stage. The slightly bowlegged driver, hustled up and opened the door for her to get in. She sat in the far corner again.

The driver was about to close the door, when from across the street, Johnny heard a familiar voice boom, "Hold it up a minute, pard, I'm comin' along!" The man hustled up and as he slid through the door and took a seat, Johnny recognized Taffy Maddox.

Blond, heavy-shouldered, Taffy had been foreman for Johnny's brother. After the ranch and cattle had been lost to Cashman, he disappeared and up until now, Johnny hadn't seen hide nor hair of him.

Taffy eased himself around, next to Johnny, grinned and said:

"Cactus Bend's the next stop, isn't it?" Redfield's eyes traveled over the sun-reddened face and then to the low-slung guns that rested at the puncher's sides. "Yeh," he answered repressing any recognition, "That's right." He thought he saw a twinkle in Taffy's steel-gray eyes. Johnny's mind began to race along. Taffy must have it fixed for a break at Cactus Bend. A spark of hope shot through his body. Where a moment ago he had almost forgotten freedom, now his heart was pounding and nerves set for action.

His gaze shifted to the girl in the corner and then to the old sheriff doz-

ing beside him. Dave Jones wouldn't let him ride off into the night without a fight. Johnny didn't want anybody hurt and he rebelled at the thought of leaving Jane, this way. But, to be free again to ride. He felt Dave's .44 nudging him again.

The driver's black whip snapped in the night air and the six horses dug in, the leather-springed coach charged down the street toward the edge of town.

As the big rig rolled by the bank at the end of the street, Johnny noticed four horses, saddled and standing in the alley alongside the building. Large saddle-bags were laced into the skirt of each saddle. He wondered why those horses were standing there at this hour of the night. The thought faded though as he looked at the cold bracelets on his wrists, watched Taffy slowly rolling a smoke and felt the pressure of his friend's Colt on his thigh. The sheriff was not relaxing his vigilance one bit.

The horses out front, had settled down to a ground-covering gait and the town faded behind. Then, the driver clamped on the binders, yelled at the horses and the coach slowed up.

WHEN they had jolted to a stop, Dave Jones awoke and stuck his head out the window. "Seems like we been flagged down by a little gent with a satchel." The driver greeted the man, "Howdy, Mr. Masino, durn near didn't see you. Climb aboard."

Tip Masino ran up to the coach and clambered inside, without a word. He dropped into the seat beside Jane as the horses jerked the coach into motion again.

His blue serge suit was dusty and the perspiration stains were evident on the white-collared shirt. His small eyes squinted, trying to focus on the passengers around him and he held tight to the black satchel in his lap.

Taffy Maddox seemed to know him and he drawled, "Kind of late in the evenin' for you to be out galavantin' around, ain't it, Tip?"

"Late? Ah, yes, it is rather late, but I have a bank delivery to make in Cactus Bend tomorrow morning and I thought by catching this stage in, I might get some rest before starting back to Hondo in the heat of the day." Masino twitched nervously in his seat under the eyes of the tow-headed roughneck with the easy smile.

The horses were laboring upgrade now and at the top, the driver pulled them in to get their wind.

Over the animals blowing and stamping, suddenly could be heard the pounding of hooves on the road behind. There was something ominous in the steady drumming sound. A chill of excitement passed over Johnny.

Taffy Maddox's right hand automatically drifted to his holster. The sheriff was alert, Jane refused to alter her position in the corner and Tip Masino's eyes kept darting back in the direction of the approaching horsemen.

On the box, the wary driver was gathering in the lines and in a monotone said to himself, "I don't like the sound of them hosses, bucko, we better git." The six-horse hitch began to roll. The first few miles were downgrade and they picked up speed rapidly.

Johnny watched as Tip Masino licked at his dry lips and hugged the satchel tight against his chest with both arms. Eyes glued on the window, the wizened bank teller stared almost pop-eyed into the night. Over the noisy, bounding coach could still be heard the horsemen coming on, louder and louder.

Johnny Redfield shot a questioning glance at Taffy Maddox. He shrugged his ample shoulders and whispered, "This ain't part of my plan, Johnny, we're in for trouble."

A shot whined overhead. The next slug ripped through the coach with

a sickening sound. Before Johnny could speak, Taffy had dropped a Colt in his lap and had started climbing through the side window for the top of the pitching stage. Whirling, Johnny looked behind just in time to see a gun flash and then a sharp cry of pain from the driver above.

Dave Jones reached in his vest pocket, pulled out the little key that would give Redfield his freedom. He held it for a moment, looked at Johnny and then deliberately unlocked the leg-irons and wrist cuffs. As Johnny rubbed his wrists, Dave shouted:

"You're my prisoner, Redfield, and don't forget it, boy. I'm takin' you. . . ." Dave gasped, grabbed at his arm and twisted in pain. Johnny yelled, "Get on the floor, Jane, with Dave and stay there!" Tip Masino huddled in the corner, beads of sweat on his pinched face, both arms still greedily around the satchel. He was mumbling incoherently, "They'll kill me, don't let them kill me, please!"

JOHNNY kicked the leg-irons loose and with Taffy's Colt in his belt, started for topside. "Here, son, take mine, I can't use it," whispered Dave, "and do you best." As Johnny took the sheriff's .44 and gunbelt he looked at Jane, she was working hard to slow the bleeding from Dave's shoulder. He couldn't find a sign of fear in her face, just determination. Dave had been looking from one to the other.

Wriggling across the top of the lunging stage, Johnny couldn't figure why they were being shot at. There wasn't a money shipment aboard. He could see Taffy's gun blazing and hear him call over the din, "Johnny, I got horses stached outside Cactus Bend, if we can hold these jaspers off. . . " Johnny blurted out, "Grab the lines, Taffy, the driver's been hit!"

The stage driver had slumped over on the box and the ribbons were slipping through his unconscious fingers. Taffy made a desperate leap for them and held on. The horses were wild with fear and running with the wind.

Johnny flattened himself against the roof behind the baggage rack, looking for a target in the pitch blackness. The Colt bucked in his hand, he heard a yell stab out of the blackness. He triggered again and again at the muzzle flashes winking at him, but on they came. The hammer snapped flatly on an empty cylinder. He threw the revolver aside and pulled the sheriff's .44. From below he could hear Tip Masino whimpering, "Get up, Sheriff, for God's sake, get up and do something, they're going to kill me!" Mixed in the confusion he made out the sheriff's voice and Jane's.

Bracing himself to fire again, Johnny saw one of the raiders alongside at deadly close range. With snaklike swiftness, he swung around and blasted the saddle empty.

Searing hot lead had chewed into his shoulder and he felt the warm blood oozing and blotting on his shirt. The .44 barked savagely again at the bandits. He didn't realize it for a moment, but as he was feverishly trying to reload, the deadly flashes in the night had stopped and the pounding hooves were fading behind.

His head was spinning. He moved only with great effort and he heard Taffy yelling back, "Cactus Bend, Johnny. I'll keep the rig movin', drop off, hit the saddle and take to the hills. I'll meet up with you later!"

If he could just muster the strength! Johnny thought of Jane Mason below with the wounded sheriff, the blubbering Masino and his satchel. What would happen to Taffy, if he dropped off and ran. He tried to move, to think, but the dark shroud of unconsciousness smothered him.

WHEN the stagecoach pulled up at Cactus Bend, Johnny had regained himself and painfully climbed

(Continued on page 120)

A Cowhand Sides

By J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

STANDING on a hilltop, with the wind ruffling his white beard and the skirts of his frock coat, old Isham Bryce watched the huge dust cloud disappear over the rim of Yellow Pine Basin. Racing wagons were behind that cloud, and if the vehicles held together for a few miles, overloaded with sodbuster families and household goods, the settlers would be driving claim-stakes on quarter-sections before sundown. Grassland which lately had supported a multitude of cattle, owned by Bryce and fellow stockmen.

The gaunt oldster turned to the

the Sodbusters

The sodbusters were crowding the cattlemen off their grasslands, and hatred was rife. Old rancher Isham Bryce, however, didn't know that his close kin were among the newcomers who faced starvation when the bitter winds of winter began to blow. . .

cowpunchers clustered about him, the look of a hurt but defiant eagle in his piercing gray eyes. "Show's over, boys. The homesteaders are in possession and all the cow outfits gone but ours, huntin' new range. Half of 'em will never find it before snow flies. You know what'll happen then. I'll take my chances winterin' here."

Harvey Hoyt, blocky, square-faced foreman, nodded. "We'll make out in Skull Canyon till spring, Isham.

The man dug for his iron, but Ron's gun flamed first.

Town's only a coupla miles away. Best to know where you're goin' to settle before you head out. Them sodbusters, I figure, are goin' to be up against it for grub. Made the run too late to do any plantin'. Not that I care," he grimaced, "if the whole passel of 'em starve to death!"

"That's their lookout!" Bryce said fiercely. "We cattlemen fought hard to save our grass leases, and time dragged on until I thought we'd spend at least one more winter in Yellow Pine. But the politicos backin' the homesteaders won out, and the proclamation openin' the basin to settlement was issued, none of the bigwigs takin' into consideration it'd be late fall when we moved out and the sodbusters moved in. Well, if they can't survive, there's plenty room for buryin'."

Agreement with the boss and the foreman seemed to be reflected in most of the bronzed faces as the party moved down the hillside to the waiting horses. One exception was Ron Gunnis, youngest hand on the Slash B spread. Tall, thin-flanked and wide-shouldered, his lean face wore a slight frown. He sympathized with Bryce for being put off his grass lease, but was surprised to hear him talk that way. Usually Isham was ready to give a man the shirt off his back. Different with the ramrod—he'd expect anything of Harv Hoyt. There was bad blood between the two.

Trailing behind as the group neared the foot of the hill, Ron spied something which had escaped the eyes of the others. A leather wallet lying in the rubble. He scooped it up and gazed at the faded photo of a young girl. He turned the pocketbook over, saw the initials "I. B." Bryce must have pulled it out of his hip pocket with his handkerchief, for he could be heard blowing his nose violently. The girl's picture interested Ron. She had eyes like Isham, and Isham's stubborn chin. Yet he had never, in the five months he had worked for Bryce, heard the old cowman mention a daughter. He jerked up his head as a voice snapped:

"What you doin' with the boss's wallet, Gunnis?"

Hoyt was striding toward him. Ron said coldly, "He dropped it. I'm fetching it to him."

"Yeh?" Hoyt came steadily closer, a look on his face like a proddy bull. "If I hadn't seen you, reckon you'd 'a' slipped it in your pocket!"

Blue flame kindled in Ron's eyes. "Sounds like you're callin' me a thief!"

"Your hearin'," sneered the ramrod, "is plumb good!"

His fists were coming up when Ron's left smashed him on the chin. Hoyt was lifted to his toes, flung backward. Gunnis skirted the twitching form, walked to where old Isham stood by his horse and handed him the wallet. "I was lookin' at the girl's picture, boss, that's all."

"I understand, Ron. Careless of me." A pained expression crossed Bryce's features. "I've never spoken of her to you. My daughter. She was eighteen then." He tucked the pocketbook out of sight beneath the skirts of his dusty coat, suddenly shot a look past Ron. "Don't pull that smoker, Hoyt!"

Gunnis turned swiftly, reaching for his low-slung Colt. Hoyt was getting up shakily, hand on six-shooter, a murderous glint in his eyes. But the hand fell away as Harv met Bryce's stern look, and he hollered, "Gunnis, you've slugged yourself out of a job! Pack your warbag when—"

Bryce took a step toward his foreman. "You asked for that, Harv! Gunnis didn't aim to keep the wallet. Seems you two have always rubbed each other the wrong way, but you're both tophands and I need you. There will be no more foolishness, though. Get me?"

Hoyt nodded sulkily, "You're the

boss-man, Isham," and bent to pick up his hat.

THE outfit swung to saddles and trotted west to Skull Canyon, where, a few days previous, they had corralled the Slash B herd. Eastward lay the small railroad town of Wagontongue, which would miss the free-spending cowhands of the dozen or more spreads ousted from Yellow Pine Basin. Only Isham had remained in the vicinity of the old grazing land, his late neighbors setting forth in the age-old search of the herdsman for grass and water.

Ron Gunnis dropped back beside stoop-shouldered Tansy Drucker, who had the look of worn and cracking rawhide that for years has been rained on and dried again under a burning sun.

"Hoyt sure has it in for you, Ron," the old cowpuncher remarked. "I've seen it before, coupla fellers always in each other's hair, no range sizable enough to hold 'em both. I ain't blamin' you. Can't expect you to take Hoyt's meanness layin' down. I'll say this for Harv, he knows the cow business from soda to hock. But some day you and him will look at each other in the smoke."

"Would've been settled by now if the boss hadn't chipped in."

"Seems as if I oughta hate them sodbusters for puttin' us out of a home," Tansy rambled on, "but somehow I can't wish them the awful end of starvin' to death. It's—it's inhuman."

"That's the word, Tansy. Say, you're an old Slash B hand. What became of Bryce's daughter? He carries an old photo of her in that wallet, was kind of tight-lipped when I spoke of it."

"Little Ella!" said Drucker, with the expression of a man looking back over the years. "I say 'little', but she must be nearin' forty if she's still livin'."

"Do somethin' to make the old man mad at her?"

"Yup, married a plow-chaser 'stead of a cowman, like Isham wanted. Feller named—uh—Cullen. He had a small holdin' in Kansas. Isham said no dry farmer'd be able to keep a big cattleman's daughter in the style she was used to and Ella'd be crawlin' back home. I dunno how they made out. Ella wrote the old man for awhile—her ma had died some time before—but I know Isham never answered, so she quit."

"Then that's why he's extra bitter against sodbusters," Ron said. "He never went near 'em while they were camped on the rim, waitin' for the signal to rush into Yellow Pine Basin."

As the cavalcade drew near the deep gorge known as Skull Canyon, they heard bovine sounds and smelled the woodsmoke of the cook's fire. A stake-and-wire fence, at front and rear outlets, held the herd on canyon grazing. A rushing stream supplied men and livestock with water. The outfit turned into the canyon mouth and hit the ground to off-saddle by the chuck and bed wagons.

THE weather turned nippy. With little to do besides caring for his horse, Ron Gunnis drifted back to Wagontongue in a few days, expecting to find the town deserted. He was surprised at the number of homesteaders roving the boardwalks where only the peg-heeled footgear of riding men had trod before.

They looked like folks who had fought a losing battle with life, as if the free land opened to them in Yellow Pine Basin was their last hope of hanging on. Their sorry nags and dilapidated rigs lined the street. Never had Ron seen so many youngsters, of all ages. The stores were crowded, but most of the people didn't look as if they had the price of a sack of potatoes. It gave him a

tight feeling in his throat. His family had lived on the ragged edge, too, and the life of a cowhand hadn't seemed tough to a half-starved kid, who had gradually made the grade from jingler to tophand.

Gunnis tied his bronc in front of a store, worked his way inside. He wanted to buy a sheep-lined coat for the coming winter. As he finally neared the counter, a young girl in sunbonnet and threadbare man's coat, much too large, turned round to leave. She had several small bundles, and in trying to worm a passage, dropped one. Ron pounced on it. He came up with the bundle in his hand and looked into smiling gray eyes. She might be poorly clad, but she was rosy-cheeked and she hadn't that whipped look. He said, grinning, "Kinda cramped quarters, Miss. Like proddin' into a herd to cut out a calf."

"I wouldn't know," she said, taking the bundle, "but it sounds exciting. Always wanted to live on a ranch. Thank you. . . ."

She was gone in the jostling crowd. Ron, as he stepped up to the counter, was thinking she reminded him a little of someone, but he couldn't figure who it was.

It was another day, a cold and blustery one, with the sky overcast, when Isham Bryce said:

"Hoyt and me been checkin' over the equipment, Ron. Find we left the brandin'-irons back at the ranch. Saddle up and go after 'em. Damned sodbusters wouldn't have any use for a cattleman's tools, so they're probably in the old shed. If we pull through the winter in good shape, there'll be calves to brand before we move on."

Harv Hoyt, who hadn't bothered Ron since the cowboy punched his jaw, was standing near the rope corral. He gave Gunnis a bleak look as the latter came over with his catch-rope. While Ron was looping and saddling his bronc, Hoyt kept humming, "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prai-ree." Tugging on the cinch, Ron thought, If that's for my benefit, you sidewinder, just watch out you ain't the hombre gets buried. He topped the horse and headed out of the canyon, into the blasting wind.

The ride back over trails where cattle had once roamed made Gunnis gloomy. The only cows he saw, all the way to the Slash B buildings, were two or three gaunt milkers. They'd fatten up on the good Yellow Pine grass, which nobody had started to plow under. One-time ranch-houses along the way were bulging with farmers' families, and many new makeshift homes had been erected on quarter-sections. Washing flapped on clothes-lines in back yards which hadn't existed before the barbed wire of the sodbusters criss-crossed the range. A real settlement was coming into being.

The old grazing land had changed vastly in a short time, but Ron Gunnis could have found his way back to the Slash B blindfolded. He had to open a gate to enter the once fenceless yard, and just inside he stopped, the reins looped over his arm. A girl with a shawl about head and shoulders had deserted the pump and was coming toward him with an eager swiftness. One look at her face and Ron spat out his quirly.

"You're the cowboy I met in Wagontongue, aren't you?" she greeted. "However did you find out where I lived?" She flushed. "I'm awful bold saying that! Of course you wouldn't be looking for me."

"Wouldn't I?" Ron said, with his widest smile. "If you want to know, I've thought of you right often, wonderin' who you were. I'm Ron Gunnis."

She seemed greatly pleased. "My name's Roxie Cullen."

He stared. "Was your mother Isham Bryce's daughter?"

"You won't go west without me, will you?" she asked, clinging to Ron.

It was Roxie's turn to be surprised. "Yes. How did you guess?"

"Why, I'm workin' for Bryce, your gran'pappy. This used to be his headquarters ranch, and he sent me back after some brandin'-irons."

A woman appeared in the ranchhouse doorway and called, "Roxie!" The girl said to Gunnis, "Come on, I want mother to meet you. Is granddad near here You know I've never seen him."

WHEN Ron stood face to face with Ella Cullen, he thought he would have known her anywhere as

the girl of the photograph in Isham's wallet, though the passing years had left their scars. Evidently they hadn't been prosperous years, but hardship, the struggle for existence hadn't broken the woman's spirit. It burned indomitably in her eyes, showed in the lift of her chin, the firm grip of her hand.

"So you're one of my father's cowboys. Come in, Gunnis. This must seem like home to you, as it does to me. I was born here. Before we made the run, I said to my husband, 'We'll drive our claim-stake at Cow Creek, unless someone else gets there first. No better piece of land in the basin.' We made it, though the wagon broke down as we reached here."

Mrs. Cullen had ushered Ron into the living-room, Roxie tagging them. The puncher pretended not to notice the scant and shabby furnishings, focusing his attention on two boys, the eldest several years younger than Roxie.

"Nice family, Mrs. Cullen," said Ron. "I expect your father will be glad to hear his own kin has settled on the old ranch, since somebody had to get it. He felt mighty bad about leavin'."

A flash of sympathy showed in Ella Cullen's fine eyes. "I'm sure he did. Only a Government order could have moved him." Her brows knit. "You'll pardon me, though, if I doubt he'd be pleased to know about us. He made it plain, long ago, that he never wished to hear from me after I married against his wishes. I'll thank you not to mention we're here. Is dad well? What has he done with his herd?"

Ron told her about the camp in Skull Canyon and Isham's plan for wintering there. "He was wise not to follow the other brand owners west with the weather gettin' bad. You know, Mrs. Cullen, your father's a stubborn man. Sometimes it's a good trait, sometimes not. But he must have a soft spot for you yet. Carries around a photo taken when you were eighteen."

"That old picture?" Her expression softened for a moment, then she shook her head. "He said things that are hard to forget. Let's talk about something else. You haven't met the boys, Isham and Braddon. And here's my husband."

A tall man in earth-stained work clothes came in from the rear of the house, briskly rubbing his cold hands. The two boys ran to him. He swung the youngest to his shoulder and gave the visitor a lazy, welcoming smile as his wife introduced Gunnis. Brad Cullen, the homesteader, appeared pleasant, easy-going. Perhaps, thought Ron, that was the trouble with him—too easy-going; not fit for a rough life.

"Reckon you stockmen haven't much love for us settlers for puttin' you off the range," Cullen drawled. "It's too bad, in a way. But, like a lot of others, we were desperate for a place to light. We're makin' our final stand here. Got to make good or—"

"We'll make good!" Ella Cullen broke in. Obviously she supplied the iron for that family.

"Sure you will," Ron said. "As for the cowmen, they'll find open range farther west or south."

THE branding-irons he had come seeking were in the shed, but the hospitable Cullens wouldn't let him go until after supper. Roxie disappeared long enough to don what evidently was her very best dress. Plainly, Ron had made a conquest. He didn't like to think what might happen to her and the rest of the family if the winter was severe and their supplies ran out. There wasn't much food on the table that night, though it was well cooked, and Ron curbed his healthy appetitie. As he was leaving, he said to Mrs. Cullen:

"If you need fresh beef any time,

your father's got plenty of it on the hoof up at the canyon."

"He's the last man I'd ask to help us out," Ella Cullen said firmly. "He told me I'd come crawling back to him some day, but I never will. Remember now, Ron, not a word about us to anyone but old Tansy Drucker. I'm delighted to learn he's still in the saddle. He taught me to ride."

"Will we see you again soon?" Roxie asked. The invitation in her smile was warm.

The tall puncher smiled down at her. "Drop around whenever I can."

He tied the branding-irons to his saddle and started his cold ride to Skull Canyon. As he topped the rim of the basin, he spied the glowing eye of a campfire about a mile away. Approaching at a trot, the cowhand made out a couple of white-tilted wagons and horses in a rope corral. It looked like a trail outfit, though he could discover no cattle in the vicinity. Wondering if it was one of the Yellow Pine outfits whose herd had stampeded, Ron steered for the wagons and the men grouped around the flames. The boisterous wind drowned his horse's hoofbeats, they were not aware of his coming until he stepped down within the rim of firelight. Someone was saying, "Better do it before it snows—"

The speaker broke off to glance up at the cowhand, who had come to a dead stop, staring. Ron's eyes were pinned to the man addressed—Harvey Hoyt. All but the Slash B ramrod were strangers to Gunnis, a tough-looking lot. Hoyt, when he saw Ron standing there, started to get up hastily, then sank back, his eyes half-lidded.

"Just gettin' back from the basin, Gunnis? Find the irons?"

"Yeh. Homesteaders invited me to supper."

The man who'd been talking to Hoyt looked the puncher over with a steely eye. "Friend of yours, Hoyt?"

"Rides for the Slash B, Qualey, but he's no friend." His voice was nasty and venomous.

Qualey glanced sharply at Hoyt, then his eyes slid round the circle of uneasy faces. Ron broke the tight silence, "What outfit is this?"

A barrel-chested man with a scarred face came to his feet. "I don't like the way you sneaked up on us, spike-heel!"

"Didn't. You couldn't hear me because of the wind."

"I say you sneaked!" The fellow dug for iron.

Ron's hand blurred down and up. Gunflame lanced at the burly man as his Colt cleared leather, bucked once, the bullet ripping Ron's coat sleeve. He saw the vicious eyes protrude in the scarred face, the glint of the six-shooter spilling from his opponent's fingers. Then the man was buckling forward, almost into the fire. It had happened so quickly, over an apparently trivial matter, that Gunnis was left a little breathless. Yet he knew it was a sinister setup, finding Hoyt in this camp of strange men, who seemed to fear he had been spying on them. Once Hoyt had established the fact he wasn't a friend, it was open season on Gunnis.

HE WHIRLED to hit the saddle as the other men scrambled out of the firelight. His spurs rammed the bronc and it pounded off around the wagons. Shots blasted into the wind, aimed to cut him out of the saddle. But horse and rider were quickly engulfed in blackness and the eddying air currents tricked his enemies when they tried to shoot by ear. No return shot flared to show them just where he rode.

Gunnis found the Skull camp asleep except for Tansy Drucker, who was keeping the fire going. As Ron untied the branding-irons, Tansy said:

"Gettin' a mite anxious about you. Late s'afternoon Hoyt said he was

goin' to Wagontongue. Wasn't sure but he'd lay for you in the basin."

"I met him. It amounted to the same thing. Hunker down here by the fire, Tansy, and I'll tell you." He made the telling brief. "I wouldn't put it past Hoyt to sell out to cow thieves."

Tansy rubbed his nose. "Nor me. It don't look good. See what he says when he comes back. Oh, yes, he'll be back."

Ron changed the subject. "Who d'you think has taken up a quarter-section on the old Slash B? She sent her regards. Someone you—"

"Little Ella!" Tansy burst out.

"Not so loud." Gunnis gave the particulars of his visit. "It's mostly stubborn pride keepin' father and daughter apart. I don't want to get Mrs. Cullen down on me by tellin' the old man, and I'm not sure how he'd take it. What's your idea, Tansy? Suppose he'd relent and send 'em some beef cattle if they get out of grub?"

"I wouldn't bet good money on it, Isham bein' mule-jawed like he is." Drucker tilted his head, glancing toward the canyon mouth. "Here comes a rider. Hoyt, likely."

Hoyt it was, riding fast. He swung off at the fire, fixing Ron with malignant gaze. "Gettin' to be quite a gunslinger, ain't you?"

"That scar-faced galoot went for his gun first. It was self-defense."

"Not the way I saw it, Gunnis!"

Ron's face blazed. "Wasn't, huh? You were mighty glad to have 'em take the job of salivatin' me off your hands, so I couldn't do any talkin' about the hard bunch I found you with—"

The loud voices had wakened old Isham in a nearby wagon. He stuck his head over the tailgate, demanding to know what was up. The three men strode to the wagon, Hoyt giving his version of the affair first.

"I was comin' back from town when I saw the outfit camped there," he explained. "Naturally, I stopped. Boss of the outfit is Jake Qualey. They're from up on the Stillwater, been deliverin' a herd down south. Gunnis Injuns up like they're cattle thieves and gets into an argument with Dwiggins, one of Qualey's men, kills him."

"If that gang ain't cattle thieves, hangin' around to grab the Slash B's," said Ron, "what did Qualey mean when he said to you, 'Better do it before it snows'? He didn't finish, catching sight of me; but it'd help rustlers make a clean getaway to run off stock while the trails are clear."

Hoyt snorted. "You can't make anything out of that remark, Gunnis! I'd been tellin' Qualey our spread was one of those put out of Yellow Pine, and he was sayin' we ought to get settled in winter quarters before it snowed. I'd have told him we were fixed snug in this canyon, but just then you stepped into the firelight. Those fellows ain't rustlers, and Qualey is likely to make trouble over that killin'."

"And you'd back him up by swearing I forced that fight!" Ron crackled.

The old antagonism between Hoyt and Gunnis clouded the real issue for Bryce. He'd never had any reason to distrust his ramrod, and Gunnis himself could offer no proof of skulduggery. The old cowman frowned.

"I know nothin' about this Qualey bunch, one way or the other, but I don't like my men gettin' mixed up in shootin'-scrapes. Take that to heart, Ron. And both of you quit wranglin'. Time enough to thrash this out if Qualey shows up with the sheriff. Go on now, hit the soogans."

QUALEY didn't bring a lawman to Skull Canyon. In fact, when Ron went to look for them the next day, the outfit had decamped. Their trail didn't go toward Wagontongue, but due north. Snow had threatened for a day or two, and fleecy flakes were swirling down as Gunnis turned back

for the canyon. He still believed the Qualey bunch were rustlers, but if it snowed heavily, the chances were against their attempting a raid on the Slash B herd. Driving cattle over snow-filled trails was dangerously slow work, they left tracks that were easy for the plundered owner to follow.

The storm wasn't of blizzard proportions, and the canyon-sheltered longhorns fared well. Ron hoped that none of their former neighbors had been in the storm's path, for a herd caught in the open was almost certain to drift with the wind until the last cow was down, and sometimes cowhands died with it. A bitter cold wave followed the storm and Ron wondered how the Cullens' food supply was holding out. He was on the point of riding down to Cow Creek when a party of farmers, with pinched, hungry faces, appeared at the canyon camp and asked Bryce if he could spare some beef for families on the verge of starvation. They said they had no money—

"Wouldn't make any difference if you had," Isham retorted harshly. "I'm not feedin' a lot of range-spoilers. None of you cared a damn about the cowmen you made homeless, the men who settled this country. But you come whinin' to one of 'em the minute the goin' gets tough."

One sodbuster pleaded, "But, mister, it ain't only grown folks who're hungry. The young'uns, scores of them, are cryin' for somethin' to eat."

Bryce was silent, but Harv Hoyt, standing beside him, sneered:

"Can't work on our sympathies that way, sodbuster. Even if it's true, feeding your kids is your job, not ours. You bulled in where you weren't wanted, at the wrong time of the year. But we'll promise not to let the wolves pick your bones if you don't pull through."

The sodbusters departed, some of them cursing the cowmen. Ron got on his horse and took another trail into Yellow Pine Basin. He had little doubt the Cullens were as much in need as any of the late visitors, but they'd never ask for help. The puncher returned to Skull Canyon before dark and drew old Tansy aside.

"I told the Cullens I was just ridin' by, got a chance to look around. The grub on hand won't last 'em more'n a coupla days. There's no use puttin' it up to the boss, after the way he acted today, though I think he felt lowdown refusin' when that sodbuster mentioned the kids. You and me, Tansy, have got to run some beef critters down to Yellow Pine, enough for all the hungry homesteaders. We are breakin' the cowboy code and we may be hung for stealin' afterward—but you're with me, ain't you?"

"All the way, son. But how we goin' to get the cattle out, right under the noses of the outfit?"

Ron couldn't answer that one, yet he knew there must be no lengthy delay. He was surprised when Hoyt, at supper, suggested that the outfit go over to Wagontongue and make a night of it.

"It's been a long time between drinks. Do you good to go along, Isham. Two men are enough to guard camp." Hoyt told off Gunnis and Drucker.

IF THE ramrod thought they'd kick, he was disappointed, for it afforded the pair opportunity to deliver a beef bunch to the hungry homesteaders. But Ron remarked on the strange coincidence as the rest of the outfit trotted off townward:

"Maybe Hoyt made a deal with that Qualey gang to steal the herd, Tansy, figurin' we wouldn't be much hindrance. It didn't snow hard enough to block the trails and they'd have the whole night to put miles between 'em and the canyon."

"I had a similar notion, Ron. That means we got to stick around and be

ready to repel raiders. Wouldn't want 'em to make off with the whole herd while we're away. It's likely they'll strike early, though, if they come."

Heaping fuel on the fire, Ron and Tansy went outside the canyon to watch, hunkering down behind a snowbank formed by a rocky outcrop. Not long afterward they descried horsebackers coming along the snow-packed road from the east. Doubtless it was the Qualey outfit, moving up to attack after observing the departure of all but two of the Slash B men. The night riders halted some distance from the canyon mouth, so that the crunch of hoofs would not warn the cowhands left on guard.

As the stealthy figures crept toward the entrance, Ron said to Tansy, "That's Qualey in the lead." He waited until the rustlers came between him and the lighted canyon mouth, then shouted, "Turn round with your hands up, you polecats!" The startled cow thieves spun about, easily locating the source of the command since there was little wind to play tricks with sound. But not a hand went up in surrender.

Muzzle fire spat from the guns of the darting figures. Two of them whirled down to the snow as Ron and Tansy triggered. But the others came on, their bullets raking the bank where sombreroed heads were raised. Tansy grunted, but didn't stop shooting. Ron beaded on a dodging form, and Tansy apparently kept the score even by dropping another. But the second cow thief had only lost his footing in the snow. He rose up, tripping his gunhammer, to sink again under Ron's flaming lead.

The blizzard of fire from the snowbank was too rigorous for even hard-bitten rustlers to face. Half the gang was down, dotting the snow in an irregular line from the point where they had started pellmell to expunge the fighting cowhands. The survivors wheeled and pelted down the trail, firing as they ran. Bullets followed them, laying two more low. Ron and Tansy reloaded, quit their shelter to crunch through ice-crusted snow and open up on the two men swarming into leather. Shots blazed back at the cowhands. One rustler slid loosely from his saddle while his mate spurred away. Riderless horses hit the road at a gallop.

FOR half an hour, Gunnis and Drucker were busy carrying bullet-branded cow thieves into the canyon. Qualey was the only one who wasn't dead when they came to him. But he hadn't long to live and he talked. Afterward, his lifeless body was laid with the others in the bed wagon, covered with a blanket. Then Ron and Tansy saddled broncs. They had much to do before the night was over. Cutting out seventy head of Slash B steers, they drifted the stock out of the canyon, replaced the stake-and-wire fence and climbed back in saddles. The drive that might result disastrously for them was under way.

The hour was late, no light showed in the old Slash B ranch-house when the lowing longhorns butted against the fence enclosing the Cullen quarter-section. But as the two saddlemen hazed the critters through the gateway, a lamp gleamed at a window. Then the door opened and Brad Cullen shouted, "Where you fellows think you're goin' with those cattle?"

"Gift from Isham Bryce, Cullen!" cried Ron. "I'll explain soon's we turn the bunch loose down yonder."

"Oh, it's Ron!" shrilled Roxie. "Put your gun down, dad!"

Gunnis saw her peering over the shoulder of Mrs. Cullen, who held the lamp. Cullen, cradling Winchester in left arm, watched the cattle flow past the house. The light was behind him, Ron couldn't make out his expression, but it must be as astonished as his wife's and daughter's.

The living-room was aglow when

the cowhands returned to the house. All the Cullens, even the boys, were waiting for them, clad in whatever they could put on in a hurry. Mrs. Cullen greeted old Tansy warmly, then, lips tightening, she spoke to Ron:

"Do I understand my father sent the cattle, thinking we're in need? Ron, you must have done what I asked you not to—told him we were here!"

"Honest, I didn't! Ask Tansy. There was a party of homesteaders at the canyon early today, beggin' the boss to give 'em a few steers as their families were about starvin'. He sent 'em away empty-handed, but later changed his mind. He had Tansy and me cut out beeves enough to last all the homesteaders who're out of grub for quite awhile. Keep some yourselves, call in your neighbors to get the rest. The cattle won't need much herdin', knowin' they're back on home range."

Brad Cullen glanced at his wife. "Wonders will never cease. Your father's surely had a change of heart toward sodbusters."

Ella Cullen nodded slowly. "I—I don't know what to say, except that I'm very grateful. . . . You two must be half frozen. I'll make some coffee."

As her mother started for the kitchen, Roxie said, her eyes dancing, "I just knew granddad wasn't as hard as you've always made him out. And some day soon, whether you like it or not, I'm going to visit him!"

WITH hot coffee under their belts, Gunnis and Drucker rode canyonward. The oldster said, "Hope that whopper you told 'em don't backfire. Should Isham send the boys after them cattle, we won't be much help to the sodbusters if we're lookin' up a tree."

Ron gave a hard laugh. "Neck feel loose like, Tansy? One thing you can bet on: Hoyt won't lead any cow hunters to the basin. He's my meat."

It was almost noon before Bryce and the rest strung into the canyon. They were talking excitedly among themselves. Isham rode straight to the fire, where Ron and Tansy stood, warming their hands.

"What's all them cattle tracks outside, goin' south?" demanded Bryce.

"We had visitors," Ron answered, and glanced at Hoyt, who rose up behind the boss. "But the rustlers didn't get anything but hot lead."

With an oath, Isham hit the ground. "Who were they? What happened?" Hoyt also dismounted, staring at Gunnis and Drucker as if he couldn't believe they still moved and breathed.

"Qualey was the head man," Ron said, and told about the uneven battle. "Only one got away. The others are over there in the bed wagon."

He started for the wagon with Tansy, the whole Slash B bunch tight at their heels. Standing sideways to keep an eye on Hoyt, Ron reached in and lifted the blanket from Qualey, who lay nearest the lowered tailgate. Isham took a look and turned to his ramrod, whose face was an iron mask:

"You see, Harv? Ron was right about them skunks!"

"Hoyt knew who they were," Gunnis said. "In fact, he planned the rustlin'. He and Qualey were old pals, stole many a cow other places before they drifted apart, and Hoyt went to work for you. Just accident that Qualey's gang came along the other night, but Hoyt was ready to sell you out for a price, figurin' you'd never get wise to his part—"

"It's a bald-faced lie!" roared Hoyt, his iron control slipping.

"You won't shout yourself out of this tight!" Ron clipped. "Dyin', Qualey talked plenty to Tansy and me!"

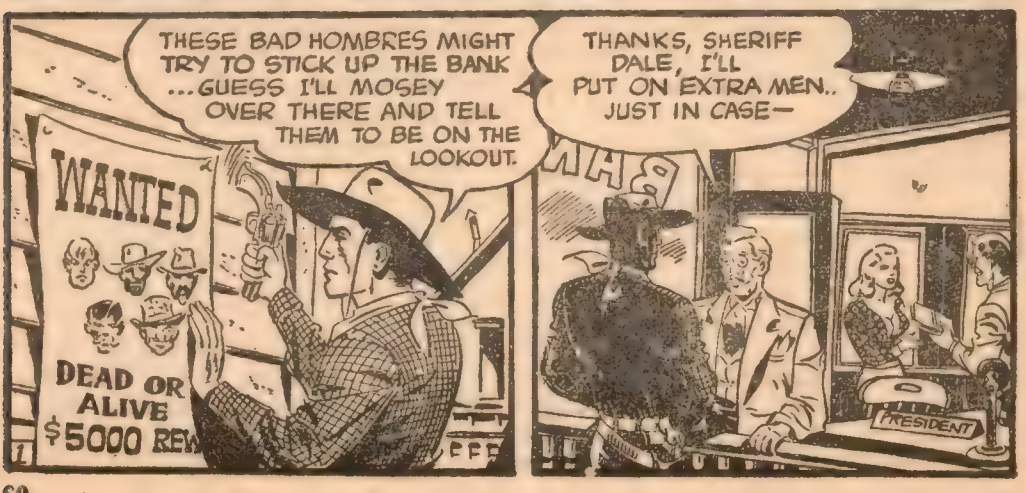
It was the moment of long delayed settlement between these two who couldn't tolerate each other. Their hands slashed to gun-hilts. Fast, both

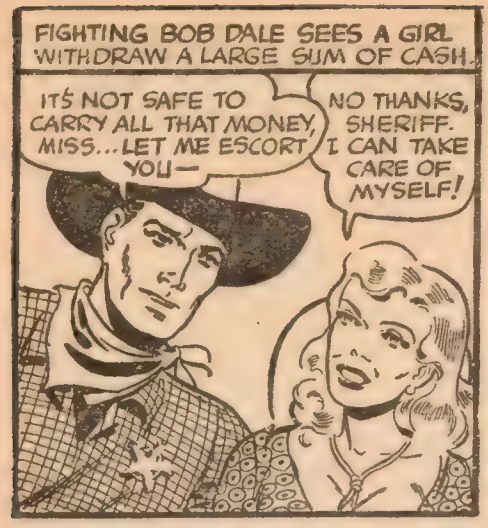
(Continued on page 120)

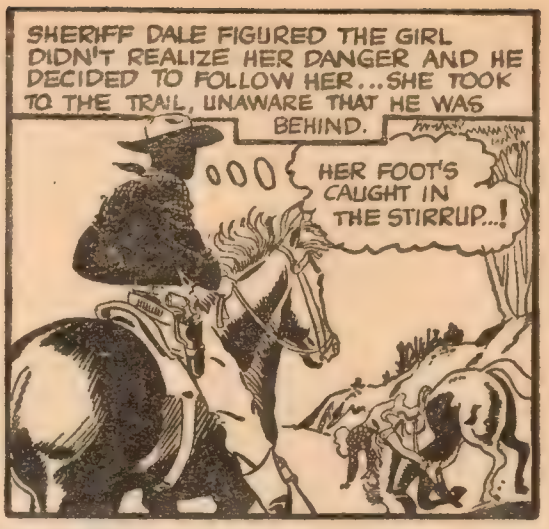
FIGHTING BOB DALE

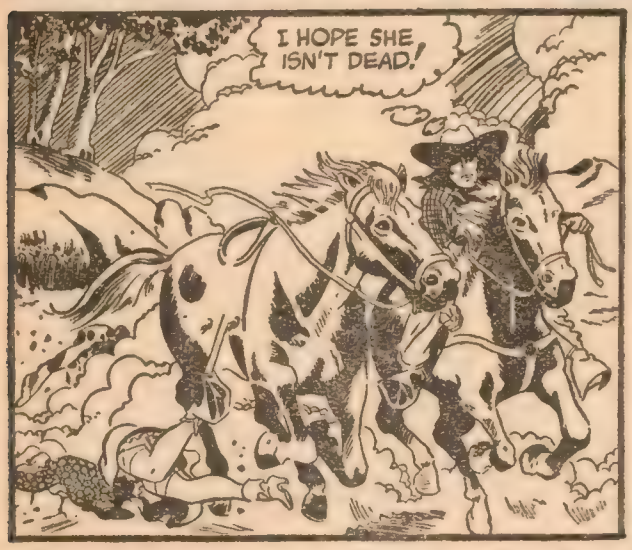
SHERIFF of CANYON COUNTY

FIGHTING BOB DALE, SHERIFF OF CANYON COUNTY, WASN'T AFRAID OF ANYONE... BUT WHEN FIVE MASKED ROBBERS SHOT AND KILLED FOR THE SAKE OF MONEY, BOB DALE ALMOST MET HIS MATCH..... FISTS FLEW AND GUNS BARKED AS TERROR STALKED CANYON COUNTY!

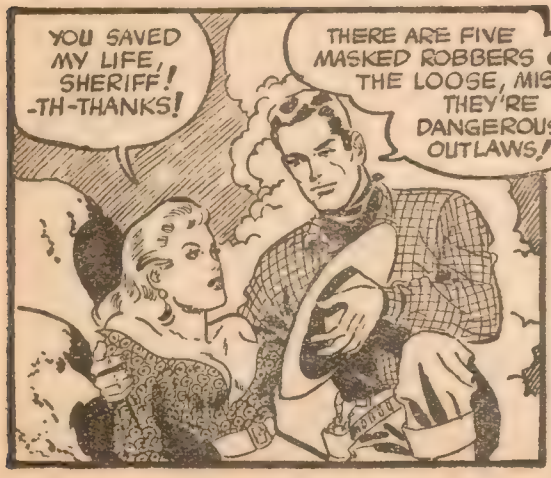

THESE BAD HOMBRES MIGHT TRY TO STICK UP THE BANK ...GUESS I'LL MOSEY OVER THERE AND TELL THEM TO BE ON THE LOOKOUT.
WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE
$5000 REW
THANKS, SHERIFF DALE, I'LL PUT ON EXTRA MEN.. JUST IN CASE—
PRESIDENT

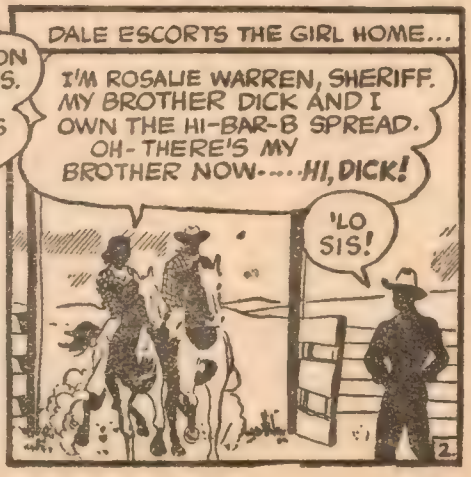

FIGHTING BOB DALE SEES A GIRL WITHDRAW A LARGE SUM OF CASH.
IT'S NOT SAFE TO CARRY ALL THAT MONEY, MISS... LET ME ESCORT YOU—
NO THANKS, SHERIFF. I CAN TAKE CARE OF MYSELF!


SHERIFF DALE FIGURED THE GIRL DIDN'T REALIZE HER DANGER AND HE DECIDED TO FOLLOW HER... SHE TOOK TO THE TRAIL, UNAWARE THAT HE WAS BEHIND.
HER FOOT'S CAUGHT IN THE STIRRUP...!


I HOPE SHE ISN'T DEAD!

DALE FREES THE GIRL'S FOOT.
SHE'LL COME AROUND IN A MINUTE...


YOU SAVED MY LIFE, SHERIFF! -TH-THANKS!
THERE ARE FIVE MASKED ROBBERS ON THE LOOSE, MISS. THEY'RE DANGEROUS OUTLAWS!


DALE ESCORTS THE GIRL HOME...
I'M ROSALIE WARREN, SHERIFF. MY BROTHER DICK AND I OWN THE HI-BAR-B SPREAD. OH- THERE'S MY BROTHER NOW---- HI, DICK!
'LO SIS!
2

DICK WARREN MOUNTS TO RIDE AWAY...
HE'S WEAK...GAMBLES ALL THE TIME...DICK GAVE GAMBLER SLADE A PROMISSORY NOTE ON OUR RANCH...THE MONEY I GOT TODAY IS OUR LAST, SO WE CAN'T PAY OFF... WHAT MY BROTHER DOES IS BINDING ON ME SO I GUESS WE'LL LOSE THE OLD HI-BAR-B.
I'M WORRIED ABOUT MY BROTHER, SHERIFF!
I'LL KEEP MY EYE ON HIM, ROSALIE... YOU'RE HOME NOW...I'LL LEAVE YOU HERE.
BACK IN TOWN...
WARREN..YOU AIN'T GONNA COME IN MY JOINT 'TIL I COLLECT ON YOUR NOTES!
AW, SLADE, GIMME A CHANCE T'WIN BACK TH' DOUGH I LOST.
...AT LEAST LET ME HAVE MORE TIME!
Y'HAVE ONE WEEK... THAT'S ALL!
DALE RIDES UP...
I'LL KILL YA... Y'DIRTY-!
HOLD IT, KID.. OR I'LL PLUG YA...!
O.K., BREAK IT UP! GET GOING, SLADE...I WANT TO TALK TO THE KID.

IF YOU WERE ANY KIND OF A MAN, DICK, YOU WOULD NOT BE GAMBLING....YOU'D BE OUT ON THE HI-BAR-B...HELPING YOUR SISTER.
MIND YER OWN BUSINESS SHERIFF...OR ELSE...!
OR ELSE... WHAT..?
THIS!
SWISSHH
SORRY I HAVE TO HIT YOU, KID, BUT YOU FORCED ME!
WHAM
A FEW DAYS LATER...
SHERIFF DALE, TH' FIVE MASKED BANDITS HELD UP AN EXPRESS OFFICE IN MORRISTOWN!
THAT'S IN THE NEXT COUNTY... MAYBE THEIR HIDEOUT'S ON OUR SIDE OF THE LINE!
SHERIFF DALE SEARCHES THE COUNTRYSIDE.
CAN'T FIND A TRACE OF THE ROBBERS OR THEIR HANG-OUT. ...THERE'S THE HI-BAR-B..GUESS I'LL SEE HOW THINGS ARE THERE.
I CAN'T MANAGE THE RANCH ALONE, DICK... WE'RE LOSING MONEY! PLEASE SETTLE DOWN AND HELP OUT...PLEASE!
QUIT BEEFIN', SIS!
4

I'LL GET THE DOUGH TO KEEP THE RANCH GOING.. ..JES' LEAVE ME ALONE!
I'M WORRIED ABOUT MY BROTHER, SHERIFF DALE. I WONDER HOW HE PLANS TO GET THE MONEY!
LATER, AS SHERIFF DALE STARTS TO LEAVE THE RANCH....
THAT'S GAMBLER SLADE! WONDER WHAT HE WANTS HERE?!
MARRY ME, ROSALIE, AN' I'LL FORGET ABOUT YER BROTHER'S DEBTS...I'LL EVEN OVERLOOK TH' PROMISSORY NOTE ON YER RANCH...
I'D RATHER LOSE THE HI-BAR-B...!
KISS ME, ROSALIE!
LET ME GO, SLADE!
GET OUT OF HERE, SLADE!
WHAM!
I'LL GO, SHERIFF...BUT WHEN THE NOTE IS DUE, ROSALIE, I'M TAKIN OVER YER RANCH!
5.

LATE THAT DAY.
I KNOW IT'S AFTER HOURS, SIR, BUT I'D LIKE TO TALK TO YOU!
ALL RIGHT, DICK. C'MIN.
BAM!
BEHIND DICK COME A GRIM AND DETERMINED BAND OF MASKED MEN.
WHAT THE-!
UGH!
BLAM!
GOT YUH!
UGH!
BAM
BANG!
WHEN HE RETURNED TO TOWN, SHERIFF DALE HEARD ABOUT THE ROBBERY. HE ORGANIZED A POSSE.
I'LL HAVE TO JAIL ROSALIE'S BROTHER. I HATE TO DO IT...
WE'VE SEARCHED THE WHOLE OF CANYON COUNTY, SHERIFF... WE'D BEST GIVE UP.....
LATER
I'VE GOT A HUNCH THE MASKED MEN MIGHT GO TO DOC PETERS FOR HELP...
THE SHERIFF WATCHES THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE...
...LATER THAT NIGHT....
O.K., DOC GET DRESSED 'N' COME WIT' ME!
W-WHAT!?
6

THE DOCTOR IS TAKEN TO THE HIDEOUT AND SHERIFF DALE WATCHES AND WAITS FOR AN OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO STRIKE.
SHUT UP DOC. MEND TH' PATIENT!
WE WERE PLENTY SMART, BOYS! WE KNEW TH' KID WAS KNOWN AT TH' BANK. IF WE FORCED OUR WAY IN WITHOUT 'IM, WE'D 'A' BEEN SHOT AT.
I WAS ON MY WAY INTA TOWN, DOC. THESE GUYS STUCK A GUN IN MY BACK, AN' SAID THEY'D KILL ME IF I DIDN'T GET THEM INTA TH' BANK! ... I'M A PRISONER HERE!
IF WE GET OUT ALIVE, DICK, I'LL TELL EVERYONE YOU WEREN'T IN ON THE BANK JOB.
BOY! WE SURE MADE A BIG HAUL!
SO THAT'S THE STORY! THEY'RE OFF GUARD. NOW'S MY CHANCE!
OKAY, GET 'EM UP!
BANG!
CRASH!
BANG!

BANG!
BANG!
OH, NO YOU DON'T!
YA GOT ME!
BOY, WHATTA PUNCH!
SOCK!
UGH!
LATER.
WELL, THAT'S THE END OF THE MASKED ROBBERS...TWO DEAD AND ONE IN THE HOSPITAL, NONE OF THEM'LL DO ANY HARM NOW.
THE NEWS OF THE CAPTURE SPREADS FAST. ROSALIE HEARD IT, AND RODE INTO TOWN...
GUESS WE WON'T NEED THESE POSTERS ANYMORE...I'LL MAKE SURE THE FIVE THOUSAND DOLLAR REWARD FOR THE CAPTURE OF THE BANDITS IS SPLIT BETWEEN YOU AND DOC PETERS, DICK.
THIS IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN REPAY YOU, SHERIFF.
I'M THROUGH WITH GAMBLIN', SHERIFF...I'M GONNA USE MY SHARE T'PAY OFF MY DEBTS...I'LL TURN OVER A NEW LEAF.

SPURS FOR A SPARTAN

By CLIFF WALTERS

FRECKLED, happy-go-lucky and gangling tall for his seventeen years of tough sledding, Rusty Oldring halted his sorrel horse on the brink of Swift Creek and shouted to the man on the opposite bank of that brawling, June-flood stream:

"Howdy, Jim! I've got a gunnysack of grub tied behind my saddle. Grub your darling daughter Verna sent up to you from Gapville—when she heard I was ridin' up this way to hunt some broncs that got away from my boss last night!"

Jim Sutherland, a slim, iron-gray prospector, stood on a jutting embankment of rock. With a bucket tied to the end of an old lariat rope, he had just hauled up a pail of water from the stream fifteen feet below. It was an easier, quicker way than descending and climbing the very steep trail just upstream—the trail toward which Rusty had been heading. Now the prospector yelled:

"Don't try crossin' your horse here, Rusty! The crick's awful swift. It's deep right now, too, and washed full

Rusty Oldring abandoned his home and his girl with bitter memories. It took him four years to get to the point where he could return and clear his name by evening the score with a sneering bully.

of boulders! Ride on down to the Meadows, a quarter of a mile below here! You can cross there!"

"I haven't got that much time to waste!" Rusty shouted back, a grin in his reckless blue eyes. "Here I come, Jim!"

The rider touched spurs to his nervous, hesitant mount. But the sorrel obeyed his master. Hoofs edged into the cold, rushing water. Rusty jackknifed his long legs up against the saddle fork to keep that water from hitting his boots.

Cautiously the sorrel horse, braced against the force of the onrushing current, felt his way out into midstream. Then he stepped into a hole with his left front foot. He tipped—and the current whipped him over on his side.

Rusty was catapulted into the water as Jim Sutherland emitted a hoarse yell. Rusty tried to get his water-whipped feet under him. And did.

Rusty's fist came up from his boot top and smashed Galt on the jaw.

But his left boot jammed down between two rocks. His spur caught. He tried to kick it free, but he couldn't stand up. He toppled over, and the stream covered him for a moment.

Somehow he managed to get his dripping, hatless red head above water again—and saw Jim dropping a rope-anchored water bucket on the current just above him. Eagerly Rusty grabbed, and caught, that rope—just before it swept by.

"Hang on!" Jim Sutherland yelled from his rocky perch.

There was a yank—and then tragedy. Jim's feet had slipped. Now he was tumbling on the jagged rocks below the embankment. Rusty groaned, spat water—and wrenched his left foot with all his might. The old spur strap broke. The boot came free. And Rusty plunged under the surface again. But only for a moment. He fought his way toward Jim Sutherland who lay limply across a big rock.

Rusty grabbed the prospector under the arms and, dragging that limp burden, fought his way toward the foot of the steep trail. A moment later, gasping for breath, Rusty said:

"Jim! Jim!"

But there was no response. And now Rusty could see blood dripping from the base of Jim Sutherland's skull. Dripping over shaggy hair and the collar of an old cotton shirt.

"Jim!" Rusty yelled, and his gasping voice sounded like a sob.

But Jim Sutherland never stirred. He was dead.

"What—*what* will I tell Verna?" Rusty moaned, and while the sound of the swift-rushing creek turned this mountain land into a hideous cacophony of voices that shouted:

"You killed him, Rusty Oldring! You and your recklessness! You killed him. . . . You killed him! . . .

STORM clouds rode the windy sky above the little range town of Gapville when Rusty, limping along with one spur, led his sorrel horse up to Doc McHale's log residence. It was here that Verna Sutherland lived and did the housework for the doctor's ailing wife—here in this two-story house that Rusty, tired and spirit-tortured, dreaded to see.

But there it was. And Doc McHale putting a new hinge on the front gate. . . .

The plump, good-natured doctor stopped in his task. His bright, dark eyes glanced at Rusty's haggard face, then at the tarpaulin-wrapped burden slung across the saddle of a sorrel horse.

"Rusty!" Doc McHale said "What—"

Words, halting at first, came from Rusty's grief-constricted throat. Then Verna Sutherland came running across the big porch, a willowy fifteen-year-old with hazel eyes and rich, brown hair that glinted with a little shaft of sunlight which penetrated the dark clouds above Gapville.

Then other people were there. People who stared resentfully at Rusty, and while he couldn't tear his own gaze away from a brown-haired girl who clung to Doc McHale and wept.

"Reckless Rusty!" growled a bystander, husky, nineteen-year-old Bruce Galt, son of Heavy Galt, the saloonkeeper. "You'd better go down to your old shack on the crick bank and wash the red off your hands, Rusty Oldring!"

"Like father like son!" put in Heavy Galt, his slate-gray eyes smoldering with resentment. "Old Jug Oldring, the coyote that died from a knife-stabbin' in my place, passed a fine heritage along to his son! An old shack on the crick bank—and a recklessness that don't stop at nothin'!"

"Get along, all of you!" said Doc McHale firmly. "Yank your spur rowels out of Rusty Oldring. Can't you see he's about bled white as it is?"

"He deserves it!" cried Verna Suth-

erland. "If I were a man, I'd take some of that recklessness out of him im—" Her voice broke, and again she sought the shelter of Doc McHale's gentle arms.

"*I'm* man enough to do anything you want done, Verna!" boasted husky, slate-eyed Bruce Galt. "I'm not over twenty-one. There's no law against *me* takin' a poke at—"

"Go on home, Bruce!" Doc McHale ordered. "This is not the time or the place for some braggart to be showing off!"

"Braggart, eh?" the husky young man echoed. "I'll show you—"

"Go home!" Doc McHale snapped.

RUSTY finally led his sorrel horse down to the old shack bequeathed by Jug Oldring, a lean, raw-hide tough man who had broken broncs for his whiskey money. A raindrop fell as Rusty went in the old shack to rid himself of a shirt smeared with blood and dirt.

Then he remembered that his other shirt was hanging on the clothes line. He stepped outdoors to get it.

A fist smashed against Rusty's face. He reeled and saw—through a blur—husky Bruce Galt leaping at him. Rusty tried to leap back, bring up his guard—but again Galt's fist came smashing through to Rusty's mouth, and the latter could taste the saltiness of his torn lips.

Dazed by the first blow, Rusty didn't stand much of a chance to defend himself. Galt was much heavier. His knuckles smashed to Rusty's nose. and the taller youth toppled. And the breath went out of him as a swearing antagonist landed atop him, and flailed for a moment with both fists.

Maybe it was falling rain that revived Rusty. He got up and stumbled toward the rain-dampened shirt hanging on a wire stretched between two old cottonwoods in the yard.

Darkness was descending when Rusty, a gunnysack of clothes tied behind his saddle, rode out of Gapville. He looked back at the livery barn where, since his father's death two years ago, he had served as flunky and bronc fighter. It was hard for him to see. His left eye was swollen shut. His lips were numb and sore. But physical discomfort was small compared with the pain in his heart—when he looked, through the drizzling rain, at the light shining in the window of the McHale home. When he thought of the tears swimming in Verna Sutherland's hazel eyes. . . .

WHEN Rusty Oldring rode back toward the Gapville range—four years later—he was astride a beautiful buckskin horse. And sitting in a new saddle which bore a small metal plate on the rear of the cantle, a plate inscribed: "Bronc-Riding Champ of Bison City Pioneer Days."

Nor was this tall rider, six-feet-one, any longer too gangling for the breadth of his shoulders. Four years had changed his appearance. His red hair had darkened to auburn. Now they called him Handsome almost as often as they called him Rusty. Many a girl had smiled at him. But it was only one girl he remembered. One girl whose oval face, framed in the soft light of brown hair, he had seen in the light of lonely campfires, or in the hoof-whipped dust of bucking contests. . . .

Rusty didn't ride alone this bright July morning. Beside him, mounted on an old roan pony and leading a big brown pack mule, rode a companion—homely, one-eyed, bewhiskered, extremely gangling Quartz Preble, prospector at large.

A rather grotesque sight, old Quartz. His greasy moccasins dragged sagebrush because his stirrups were so long and his roan pony so small. His overalls were supported by a single strap, an old bridle rein, looped over a stooping shoulder. His shirt was of buckskin, discolored and

water-proofed with the spatterings of frying bacon. His ears were almost as elongated as those of the big brown pack mule.

Trailing down from the summit of the Moose Horn Mountains, the two riders were looking at the vista far below when Quartz said, "So that little speck of chimney smoke down there in that valley is Gapville, eh?"

"Yep," said Rusty.

"The town where the badman, Big Barney Brink, stuck a knife in your dad, eh? The same as the overgrowed skunk would've ended me with a knife in that saloon brawl a year ago—if you hadn't stopped him!"

Rusty made no reply, and Quartz rambled on, "It sure was a revelation, the way you beat that big skunk down into the ground like he was a tent peg. Gad, lad! Your thirsty old pa would've been proud of you. When it comes to ridin' the world's worst buckin' horses—and playin' mule kick with them lightnin' fists of yourn—"

Grinning, Rusty said, "The wages I'm payin' you ain't really high enough for all this flattery, Quartz, so forget—"

"I ain't takin' a nickel wages from you for trailin' over here with you!" Quartz protested. "You saved my scalp, didn't you? If I can do you a little favor, help rub a little salve on old wounds— Sorry, lad. Pretend I never opened my whisker-fringed mouth!"

Two hours later the riders were fording Swift Creek, low and clear now. But dread was a rising tide in Rusty's heart as he glimpsed an old spur still wedged between two rocks under the stream's surface; as he climbed the steep, rocky trail above the jutting rock where Jim Sutherland, an honest but luckless, prospector had once stood.

RUSTY led the way to Jim's old cabin, a deserted-looking place that stood near the entrance of the tunnel in which Sutherland had spent so many weeks and months of back-breaking, fruitless work. And while the people down in Gapville had called him a gold-chasing fool that ought to have been earning a living for his daughter.

"Think we can camp here a day or two in this old cabin?" Rusty said to Quartz.

"Sure," said the prospector. "I've holed up in worse pack-rat nests than this. Let's slip the pack off old Bray and get some grub to cookin'. That breakfast we et at daylight this mornin' vanished into the rarified atmosphere of the summit a long time ago. . . . So this is where Prospector Sutherland badgered into a hillside, eh? He must've liked to swing a pick better'n bartenders like to change twenty-dollar bills for blind-drunk customers. Me, I'd have done my rock-knockin' in the country up above here."

"I don't know anything about pawin' around for pay dirt," Rusty answered. "Jim used to read books on mineralgy, or whatever they call it."

"Them!" Quartz snorted disgustedly. "The college gents that write them books wouldn't know pay dirt if they fell face-down in it and come up with their teeth all gold-filled. I wouldn't waste the sight of my one eye tryin' to read them big words which is longer'n a jerk-line team—and which don't mean no more'n a prairie dog makin' faces at a grizzly bear!"

"*Can* you read?" Rusty inquired, chuckling.

"Sure I can read!" Quartz declared. "I didn't go prospectin' till I was nearly through the third grade—and made the mistake of stuffin' a dead skunk in the schoolhouse stove one mornin' 'fore the teacher got there." His China-blue eye twinkled as he added, "What do you think I am? Some ignorant old prospector?"

"Whatever you are, you're a square-

shooter," Rusty answered. "That's all I care about."

After dinner, Quartz Preble mounted his roan pony and rode alone toward the little town cradled in a valley of the foothills. Rusty chopped some firewood and cleaned up the old cabin once occupied by Jim Sutherland. The young man worked absent-mindedly, and while memories plagued him. He wished, deep in his heart, that he had been permitted to make Quartz Preble's mission to Gapville. Wished he were going to see Verna. She was still there, Rusty had been told by a sheepherder, three months ago. Still living at Doc McHale's home. And going to dances with Bruce Galt who now operated the saloon bequeathed to him by Heavy Galt who had died—from a gun in a transient gambler's hand.

Bruce Galt! That name always aroused anger in Rusty, always brought back the pain of a beating he had taken on a rainy, never-to-be forgotten night four years ago. Every time Rusty shaved he saw in the looking glass that little scar on the bridge of his straight nose, a scar left there by a ring Bruce Galt had worn. . . .

ON THE old table he was cleaning up Rusty saw a piece of folded paper, a sheet torn from a ruled pencil tablet. He opened it and read, "Dearest Dad: Just a little note to tuck in among the grub that Rusty has offered to take up to you on the new gray bronc he is breaking. I am sending a cake in a wooden box. Mrs. McHale told me I could make one for you and one for Rusty. He will find his in his little cabin when he gets back to town. I hope you are not working too hard in the tunnel, and I pray every night that you will strike it rich! Love. . . .Verna."

Rusty pocketed the note. He remembered the night he had found the chocolate cake waiting for him in his old shack—and that warm smile in Verna Sutherland's hazel eyes when he had thanked her for it. She and the McHales had been mighty nice to him after the death of his father. Sometimes he had been invited to eat meals at the McHale home. . . .

It was dusk when Rusty saw Quartz Preble riding up to the old cabin. Rusty's voice was tense as he said, "Did you see her, Quartz?"

"Yep."

"Did she sell you this mine?"

"Yep."

"Was she satisfied with the thousand dollars you offered her for it?"

"Yep."

"Can't you do anything but 'yep' like a coyote?" Rusty exploded.

"You're all worked up like a cuttin' horse," the old prospector said. "I'll tell you all about it. Tell you how beautiful Verna Sutherland is—and that she ain't married—yet."

"Yet?" Rusty shot that word out.

"Well," Quartz drawled, stiffly dismounting, "it seems like there's a young whiskey peddler in Gapville named Bruce Galt that's mighty set on makin' Miss Sutherland Mrs. Galt. Oh, you didn't ask me to snoop around none. All you asked me to do was buy a no-good hole in a sidehill that Jim Sutherland *thought* was a mine. But I done a little pryin' around on my own hook—in the Galt saloon. But it seems like Bruce Galt ain't makin' too much of a success of the whiskey-peddlin'. He's spendin' a little too much time at the poker table, tryin' to make money too fast—so the tipsy barkeep told me—and bettin' on the wrong cards. The barkeep thinks Miss Sutherland *might*—he couldn't swear to it—marry Bruce boy if he'd sell his saloon, or what's left of it, and try to buy a little cow ranch somewhere."

"Yeah?" Rusty said metallically.

"Yep," Quartz answered. "And why have you got your fists clenched hard enough to knock my old pack mule down with? Take it easy, feller. And

stop eatin' your heart out. You haven't told me, but I've still got *one* eye to see with. You've been in love with a certain hazel-eyed girl ever since you was a kid. It looks like you always will be. Well, if you can't forget her, go and ask her to forget the past. Ask her if, after four years, she can't see the difference between murder and an accident!"

"Sorry, Mr. Preble," Rusty said, and his tone was as hard as the rock on the dump at the entrance to Jim Sutherland's old tunnel. "Tough as you think I am, my knees are too sensitive to crawl on! If Galt's tipsy bartender was right—if the hazel-eyed girl can smile on a treacherous coyote like Bruce Galt, she ain't worth stewin' about anyway!"

QUIETLY the old prospector said, "Are those words comin' from your heart, Rusty Oldring, or are they just shootin' off the end of your tongue like sparks off a hard-hit anvil?"

"Let's have that deed she signed," Rusty said.

"Sure. Here you are," Quartz replied. "Now all you've got to do is have the old lawyer down at Gapville make another one out to Verna Sutherland. Then we'll ride on over to that big celebration at Trail Bend, and see if you can win some buckin' contest money to put in your empty pocket. Oh, you'll win, all right. You've proved that you can set up there in a leather throne and rowel the worst of the buckers. That's *one* place Rusty Oldring don't come out loser."

If Rusty heard, he gave no indication. He was looking at a deed he had unfolded, was studying the clear, fascinating signature of a girl who had finally realized something from the efforts of her father."

"Seems like I've rode a thousand miles today," old Quartz was saying wearily. "Couldn't we rest up here a day or two 'fore we head for that celebration over at Trail Bend?"

Nodding, Rusty answered, "We could. You can ketch up on your beauty sleep while I ride the mountain slope range off there to the west. Three years ago I had a darned good little sorrel horse go lame on me from a stone bruise. I turned him out on the range over in the Badger Basin country, but he must've made his way home, like horses do. Anyhow, I'm goin' to try findin' him."

"Good!" Quartz said. "All day tomorrow I'll lay flat on my back and snore like the mighty wind blowin' through pine timber."

ALL the next day Rusty rode his fast-walking, tireless buckskin. But, although he sighted many a bunch of range horses, he caught no glimpse of his sorrel horse, Copper. If Rusty was disappointed, he was not too surprised. Maybe someone had picked the horse up by this time. He might be anywhere. Or dead.

It was sundown when Rusty rode up to the old cabin built long ago by Jim Sutherland. He was hungry, having missed his noon-day meal, and a little irked when he saw no smoke rising from the cabin stovepipe. Well, maybe he would find Quartz flat on his back and snoring, all right. Maybe the old prospector had brought a bottle back from Gapville — from Bruce Galt's saloon yesterday evening—

"It's about time you was showin' up, you horse-huntin' hide-out!" yelled gangling Quartz Preble, hurrying out of the cabin. "Here I've been hoppin' around like a coyote with a mouthful of porcupine quills and—"

"For gosh sake, what's the matter?" demanded Rusty, eyeing his trembling, loud-talking companion curiously.

"You cast your bread on the waters and started an avalanche—that's what!" Quartz bellowed. "Look!"

He whirled, ran back to the cabin door, and returned with two chunks of ore in his trembling hands. He said, "I didn't beauty-rest all day. I got to snoopin' around in Jim Sutherland's diggin's—with my pick! Look what he'd found if he'd lived a few days—maybe just a few hours longer!"

"What is it?"

"Gold-bearin' ore, Blindy!" Quartz answered. "Heft it! Look at it! Smell it—kiss it like I did! And it's yours! Yours, Rusty Oldring!"

Rusty was numb. He was still a little numb when Quartz pulverized the ore in an old mortar once owned by Jim Sutherland—and proved that that latter had been only inches away from sinking his pick into a vein of pay rock. Then Rusty's spirits began to soar.

RUSTY OLDRING'S spirits were not so high when he and Quartz rode into Gapville the next morning, just before noon. Rusty looked at the old log shack where he had lived. But it wasn't half-hidden by weeds as he had expected it to be. The yard was neat and clean. Perhaps someone had moved in— Well, they could have it. He looked at the spot where he had lain, a victim of Bruce Galt's treacherous, thudding fists, that evening long ago. And his deep blue eyes narrowed for an instant.

"Changed your mind yet?" Quartz grunted.

"No!" Rusty answered, jaw firm. "Didn't I accidentally stab Verna Sutherland deep enough once—without stealin' a gold mine from her for a thousand dollars?"

Shrugging, Quartz replied, "It's your mine, mister. And there's the lawyer's office up there."

A moment later Rusty was swinging from his buckskin horse. He was moving toward the door of the lawyer's log office when Bruce Galt, heavier and redder of face than he had been four years ago, came striding out.

Galt jerked to a stop, his slate-gray eyes appraising Rusty.

Galt said, "Well, if it ain't the tall boy that rode out of Gapville with a beat-up face—and come back with a thousand dollars consolation money! What's the matter, Mr. Oldring? Have you got your lariat on some sucker? One that wants to buy a 'gold mine' and pay a good price for it?"

"Rusty! Rusty!" cried a girl's voice.

THE redhead turned and saw Verna Sutherland, accompanied by old Doc McHale, coming out of the store next door. Rusty saw a pair of wide-set, long-lashed, hazel eyes shining at him. He saw morning sunlight kindling little flames in golden-brown hair. Then he stiffened as he heard Bruce Galt growling:

"Yeah, sweetheart! It's Rusty Oldring— the gent I beat up for you once —remember?"

"That's right," Rusty said, and his voice was a sharp knife lancing toward the slim, beautiful girl. "Come in the lawyer's office, Miss Sutherland. I'll sign a deed, after Quartz Preble here signs one—and you can have the Swift Crick mine back."

"So you got Mr. Preble to buy—" The girl stared. "And pay so generous a price for property that isn't worth the taxes I've paid on it!"

"Big, noble Rusty Oldring!" Bruce Galt sneered. "Thinkin' he can erase Jim Sutherland's death with a thousand, dirty dollars! Makin' a grandstand play to—"

"What are you squawkin' about, you tinhorn gambler?" Rusty said coldly. "Maybe *you'll* get your paws on part of the money—if Verna hasn't got any better sense than to marry you."

"I'm *not* marrying him!" the girl cried. "I've tried to be friends with him, help him, but—"

"You're wasting your time, and I told you so," cut in Doc McHale sternly.

"You meddlin' old quack!" Galt rumbled. "What you need is some of the same medicine I give Rusty Oldring once—and a lot of other coyotes since!"

As Galt moved menacingly toward the elderly doctor, Rusty said, "You lay a hand on Doc, you dirty scum, and you'll wish—"

As treacherously as he had thrown a blow once before, Bruce Galt now tried it again. He lashed out at Rusty, but the latter was not caught unawares this time. He ducked. His long arm, powered with a broad shoulder, whipped out. Knuckles smashed to Galt's red face, and rocked him back on his big boots.

He blinked. Another blow flattened his nose. He roared like a goaded grizzly and rushed at his opponent. A blow glanced off Rusty's ribs. He retaliated with a hard smash under Galt's heart—and while Quartz Preble yelled:

"Take him, Rusty. You can do 'er! Anybody want to bet a drink against my pack mule?"

PEOPLE were running into the street. They saw Gapville's champion fighter, Bruce Galt, dripping from the nose and mouth. They saw him throw blow after blow—and always just miss landing squarely on the handsome face of Rusty Oldring. They saw Rusty's long arms strike out and land punches to Galt's battered face and punished body. And they seemed to enjoy watching—these citizens who had heard Galt boast of the beating he had once given a heartbroken youth.

There was a deadly, savage coldness about Rusty's fighting. This was no flaring explosion of hate with him. He had learned to fight in a dozen cowtowns over-run with toughs like Galt. And now, with a glacial grimness that left eyes staring and mouths gaping, he waged the battle that he had often pictured in his mind.

He ripped and slashed at Galt whose face was now a smear of sweat and blood. Galt who, goaded by the hooting of old Quartz Preble, lunged forward, time after time, only to be staggered by blows that nearly tore his head from his thick neck.

Galt's breath was wheezing up from a fist-jolted chest. He was blind with anger, crazy-mad with the tide going against him.

It was Doc McHale who said, "Finish it, Rusty! Please!"

Rusty obliged. His right fist came up from his boot top. It smashed against Galt's drooping jaw. And the battle was won. Galt lay, as Rusty had once lain, limp and helpless under a barrage of punishment.

"Thanks, Rusty," Doc McHale said, and bent over the vanquished.

But it was at Verna Sutherland that Rusty looked. The girl stood there as if transfixed, gazing down with terrified eyes upon Bruce Galt. Then she turned and looked at Rusty. She said:

"I—I appreciate what you've tried to do for me, Rusty Oldring, but, now that I know Mr. Preble was only acting as your agent in trying to help heal old wounds—well, I'm giving your money back to you."

"If I take it, you'll take the Swift Crick mine back?" said the young man slowly.

"Yes. Or you can keep it. It doesn't matter, does it?" She blinked a tear from a hazel eye.

"All right," Rusty said. "I'll take the money and give you your mine back. Come on in the lawyer's office. You, too, Quartz!"

Ten minutes later Rusty was mounting his buckskin horse and saying, "Come on, Quartz! Trail Bend's a long ways from here."

"Maybe you'd *better* be on your way," said old Doc McHale testily. He added, "Since it appears that your

generous gesture was, as Galt said, more or less of a grandstand play, Mr. Oldring!"

"Ride on, Rusty," Quartz called. "I'm goin' over to the saloon and buy a pint bottle—'fore Galt feels well enough to throw me outa there for hootin' at him!"

Rusty whirled his buckskin and rode down the street.

HE HAD ridden alone for about five minutes when he heard hoofbeats. He hipped around in his saddle. But it wasn't Quartz Preble that was overtaking him. It was a girl galloping along on a sorrel horse, a girl whose bright brown hair streamed in the sunlight.

"Oh, Rusty!" she cried, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Where did you get my sorrel horse —Copper?" he demanded.

"He was found on the range two years ago," Verna said. "I've been keeping him for you—in Doc's pasture. Hoping *some* day you'd come back to claim him. That was—if you hadn't sold him!"

"Yeah?" Rusty blinked.

"Yeah," answered the wet-eyed girl. "And I kept the weeds trimmed down around your old cabin—kept the place cleaned up—hoping, praying that—"

"Yeah?" Rusty said, voice husky.

"I didn't hate you—because of an accident!" the girl declared. "Not after the first shock wore off! Oh, I didn't want you to run! Any more than I want you to run now—and leave a gold mine behind you!"

"Gold mine? Did that danged old wobble-tongued Quartz Preble tell you—"

"Yes—bless him!" wept the girl. "And we've got to cut him in on a share of it, Rusty. He found what Dad didn't! You ought to know something about gold, Rusty! Your heart's made of it—as you've proved today!"

A moment later Rusty was off his buckskin horse. And Verna was slipping down from a sorrel horse's saddle into the arms of a tall, knuckle-skinned young man who, gazing into a pair of tear-silvered hazel eyes, saw dark barriers being swept away.

Verna and Rusty were still locked in each other's arms when Quartz Preble came galloping up on his old roan pony and yelled, "Goin' to Trail Bend, Rusty?"

"Go on back to Gapville—'fore I bounce a hunk of gold ore off your unbarbered head!" Rusty called, grinning. "Verna and me will come along soon!"

"Sure you will!" Quartz whooped. "But don't rush. Give me time to get the Gapville brass band out to meet you!" The old man got on his way as the two young people smiled.

COMING NEXT ISSUE:

. . . **"ANGRY GUNS"** . . .

A Smash Novelette by KARL R. KASKY

. . . **"SENOR SEGUNDO"** . . .

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BIG JULY ISSUE ON SALE APRIL 23

TROUBLE IN REVERSE

Illustrated by H. W. Kiemle

By FLINT ALDERMAN

AS FRED JACKSON plunked his gaunt figure down at a card table in the Silver Buck Saloon, anger mushroomed inside of him. His square jaws set firmly, weathered features stony. An open shirt-collar revealed a part of a full chest. A four pointed star hung on his shirt-front, partly concealed by a leather vest. With an elbow on the table, he rested

Fred forced his horse when he saw Cassidy drag Jennie from the wagon.

his broad chin on an up-turned palm and used the bottom of a half-empty beer glass to make wet rings on its mahogany top.

Repairing guns had been his business, but last night his little gun-shop in Bearcat Springs had been wrecked and robbed of his stock of guns and ammunition, by Bill Cassidy's outlaws. So he had joined the 4-Star Patrol, an organization of citizens to help the sheriff quell lawlessness. All other members of the organization, including the sheriff, were out of town.

He had personally tested the guns that he sighted, and bore a reputation of being the best shot in the country. Having previously worked on ranches and

served as deputy sheriff, he knew those games, too. Knowing that Bill Cassidy frequented the saloon, he had drifted in, hoping to cast eyes on the outlaw. Aside from himself and a bartender, the room housed no occupants.

Humming a tuneless medley to himself, he sat meditatively. Then, suddenly, the late afternoon silence became shattered. Fred snapped his long backbone straight, the medley dying on his freckled lips.

A stocky man and a slim girl burst in at the front door. The girl's long, auburn hair streamed behind her back-tilted head. Her wide, dark eyes showed gloss. The plain, gingham dress she wore hung a trifle too low for easy running. Possibly she had not passed out of her 'teens, but the man's graying hair denoted age. They dashed past Fred toward the room's rear.

Fred Jackson twisted around and watched them enter a rear room, then turned back to his beer. The glass had touched his lips when a sound of quick steps came from behind. Before he could flop around, somebody nabbed the brim of his Stetson and yanked it down over his eyes, exposing a thatch of sandy hair.

He jerked erect and slapped the hat back from his eyes in time to see the strange couple scampering out at the back door. He gave his cartridge-filled gunbelt a hitch and sprinted after them. They were nearly a block down the alley, running like bullet-burnt cats, when he came out.

As he clipped down the alley, the thud of his heavy boots rhymed with the speeding feet of the couple in his lead. Then his leaders began to slacken pace and toss glances over their shoulders, as if it had been a prank.

The scowl on Fred Jackson's broad forehead deepened. He urged his long legs to move faster. He had a sense of humor, but strangers pulling his hat down over his face and trying to rub it in, exceeded his patience.

Three riders cut into the alley a block ahead of them. The man and girl switched to a path that intersected an alley, back of the general store, behind a shed out of Fred's sight. The riders came at full gait and went past the path before coming to a skidding halt amid a huge dust-fog. They wheeled their mounts and romped after the fleeing couple.

Sixguns blared behind the shed. Fred raced to the scene of the fight.

WHEN Fred rounded the shed's corner, the sight his eyes took in made him wince. The girl could not be seen, but the old man, with his back to the board wall of the store, exchanged quick shots with the riders. And then he flung his gun aside, pitched forward and sprawled in the dust.

Fred noticed that the killers wore handkerchiefs across their noses below their eyes. One of them rated fat and stocky; the others slim, but no time stood available for further details. He yanked out his sixshooter and sent three lead pills after them, but the range proved too great for desired results.

As they galloped away, Fred ran across and bent over the prostrate man. Crimson smeared his shirt, front and back. A hole gaped in his left shoulder and three in his chest. Fred's jaw set. A life blotted out meant killers to be corralled.

Sounds from behind caused Fred to snap straight and whirl, flipping a .45 into view. The girl had pushed aside a creaky door and pegged out of a coal house at the rear of the store, where she had hidden from the killers.

With every nerve alert and puzzlement stabbing his brain, Fred Jackson's muscle-padded body cast a long shadow into the dusty street. His gray eyes took the girl's measure from head to heels. Something about her big, brown eyes and quirky lips met his instant approval.

She did not seem to notice the gun that Fred unconsciously held half-mast. "Uncle Jake!" she busted out and fell to her knees beside the body. "Oh **gosh**! Oh gosh! He's dead!"

Her moisture-filled eyes raised to Fred. "You got to get him—right quick!"

"Take it easy, sister." Fred's voice carried a note of sympathy. "First thing, I wanta know what this means, and why you tried to make my head come through my hat."

"I didn't do it to make you mad, mister," the girl insisted earnestly, pushing herself erect. "He was after me and Uncle Jake. We went into the saloon to dodge him. When we passed you, I saw the star on your shirt. I thought maybe you'd help us, if I could get you to follow, and the only way I knew was to mess up your hat. I didn't have time to tell you what I meant, but," she choked, "it didn't do any good!"

While she talked, Fred studied the girl, her mussy hair and leaky eyes. He liked the tone of her voice and sincere words. Deciding that she possessed honesty, connected with extreme loveliness, he felt a queer heart throb. He drew a long breath and asked: "Who is he—who chased you?"

"Bill Cassidy, and he'll kill me too, if you don't get him!"

"Bill Cassidy," Fred repeated meditatively, "what's he got against you?"

"He raided our ranch t'other night and started to drive off our horses. We tried to stop him, but he shot my dad. Uncle Jake and me got away from him by hiding in some hay in the barn. He hunted a long time, but couldn't find us."

OUTWARDLY, Fred Jackson appeared calm, but slow, smoldering rage burned inside of him. He wanted Bill Cassidy for cattle and horse stealing, anyway, as well as for wrecking and robbing his gun-shop. And now, he found out that the bandit had two murders chalked against him, one of which had been committed before his eyes. He burned with vengeance.

"What's your name, girlie?" Fred gave her a smile.

"Jennie Carl."

"Then your dad must have been Ned Carl."

"Yes sir."

Fred glanced around them. Quite a crowd had gathered. "Take care of Jake Carl's body," he ordered, to nobody in particular, but several quickly responded.

He turned back to the girl. "Well, Jennie, I'll have to take you home."

"I haven't got any home," she reported sadly.

Fred Jackson had joined the 4-Star Patrol to stamp out the owlhoots, but he got nowhere until a girl and a man ran into the Silver Buck Saloon. He followed them, and picked up a trail spotted with gunfire and blood.

"Well, where have you two been staying?" Fred's voice sounded soft.

Jennie stared at the ground. Fred could see that she tried desperately to hide her grief. He felt another heart roll. This girl really needed help.

She said: "Since dad got shot, Cassidy put guards around the ranch, to get us if we went back. So Uncle Jake and me hid out in the hills. We were safe there till we had to come in to get grub. But, say, can't we go get a box of money Uncle Jake and me hid? It's only five miles out of the ranch.

Fred's gray eyes widened. "How come Cassidy let you hide a box of money?"

"He didn't," Jennie explained. "Uncle Jake and me sneaked in after he quit hunting for us, got it out of the house and buried it behind the barn. We didn't take it with us, because we thought he might catch us, but if you think it's too dangerous, mebbe we'd better not go."

"You afraid Cassidy will find it?" He moved closer to her.

Her big eyes raised to his. "Yes, I am."

"Than that's where we're going."

"But if he's got guards out, won't it cause more trouble?" Jennie displayed thoughtfulness.

Fred gave his gray eyes a couple of extra blinks. "Trouble's what I'm looking for. But maybe you'd better stay here in a hotel, while I go get that box for you."

"No, I've got to go along to show you where we put it." Her eyes again raised to Fred. "It's just a little tin box, about a thousand dollars in bills in it. I'm not afraid to go out there with an officer."

Fred considered a moment. "All right, since you've got no saddle horse, I'll borrow the storekeeper's team and delivery wagon, so we can ride out in it. Then you're staying in a hotel till I get them crooks."

THE evening registered hot and sultry. Pale moonlight glistened on beads of sweat that trinkled down Fred Jackson's red face and soaked his blue shirt. As the old horses jogged along the bumpy road, choking dust-billows fogged up from their hoofs. Fred often slapped their backs with the lines to make them go faster.

Heavy vapors were boiling up. By the time they reached the ranch, clouds packed the sky. Darkness had grown intense.

"There's the ranch." Jennie poked out a slim finger.

Nothing indicated that guards were stationed about the low, rambling buildings that resembled dusky shadows in thick murk. Fred realized that if any guards were there, he would stand little chance of seeing them first.

He took a wide circle around the buildings and brought up beside a pole corral at the rear of the barn. He wrapped the lines around the dash and climbed out. The horses were trained to stand without being tied.

Silently they took shovels from the wagon and skirted the corral to a place where Jennie led. Darkness fell so dense that hunting for a buried box seemed like searching a city dump for a toothpick. But Jennie had the location pretty well in mind. Only a few minutes were required for her to find the exact spot. Shovels grated on metal, then they lifted the little box out.

With the tin container in Jennie's hands, they went the same way back to the spring wagon. The tools were carefully replaced, and the money box hidden under the seat.

"I wish some arrangements could be made so I might live here," Jennie sighed, when they were ready to go back.

"You really want to live here?" Fred asked, as he released the lines.

"Yes, I like it here. This is a good ranch. We get lots of rain, and I'll bet I could make a go——"

Fred was glaring up into the blackened heavens. "From the looks of that cloud, we're due for more rain," he cut in. "Let's get going before it turns loose. It's dark enough now, and the road's none too plain."

Jennie had already climbed into the seat, and Fred had one foot on the hub of a wheel, ready to hoist himself into the wagon, when a hoarse voice commanded: "Get your fingers in th' clouds!"

Fred and Jennie whirled to see a dusky bulk within a few feet of them. The man's face could not be discerned, but his bulk matched that of Fred Jackson. Too dark to see, but they surmised he had them covered.

Fred Jackson pitched his hands skyward.

"Come off'n thar, kid!" the man growled. "I know who yeh be an' yeh're goin' to wait here fer Cassidy! He'll be right tickled to see yeh, an' thet goes fer your friend, too!"

Anger shook Jennie Carl. Whether she fought or begged, it would mean the same fate her father and uncle had drawn, if not worse. She grappled for a

shovel handle and yelled: "Come and get me, you onery skunk!"

THE man shoved swiftly toward the wagon. "Why, yeh little squirt, I'll teach yeh!" he gripped Jennie's arm before she could raise a shovel.

He still held his gun on Fred, but for a moment his face turned toward Jennie. Fred promptly took advantage of it and swiped his fist across the man's jaw. He reeled backward and hit the ground like a sack of sand.

"Boy! what a sock!" Jennie exulted.

"Hurry, gimme a neck rope." Fred glanced up at her. "I gotta tie this humbre up before he comes to."

Jennie jumped from the wagon with a short rope that had been used to tie horses. In no time, they had the man's hands and feet securely bound. They wadded a handkerchief into his mouth, drew his bandanna over it and tied its corners together behind his neck. That done, they heaved him into the wagon. Fiery streaks lashed the clouds, and thunder clapped over their heads. Both of them looked up.

"Come on, Jennie," Fred urged, "we'll have to hurry. That cloud's coming up fast."

Fred had just picked up the lines when Jennie said: "Riders coming over there, near them?"

Fred looked toward the road, where Jennie pointed. He saw nothing, but heard horses jolting along. They swung into the ranch-yard and pulled up by the house. A celestial glow revealed three men on horses.

"Hey, Chuck!" called one of them.

"That's Cassidy," whispered Jennie. "I can tell his voice."

"Then, this feller in the wagon must be Chuck," Fred reasoned, handed Jennie the lines and sprang softly to the ground. "You drive back to Bearcat Springs the way we came, introduce Chuck to the sheriff and tell him to come here quick. I'll try to hold them here till he comes."

Jennie understood how to handle horses. Without a word, she clucked to the team and started over rough ground toward the road. Thick murk rendered human eyesight useless, but the wise, old horses would find the road.

"Hey, Chuck!" the coarse voice rapped for the third time.

Fred Jackson grabbed an idea. He slipped in at the rear barn door and pegged out at the door that faced the house, close to those three riders. As he came out, a saddled horse that stood tied to a fence near the door, snorted and shied.

"Whoa, baby," Fred crooned softly to the horse, then louder: "Comin', Boss!" He tried hard to make his voice like Chuck's.

By a lingering flash of lightning, he registered one of the riders as being short and fat, while the other two used slim frames. Undoubtedly they were the men who had shot Jake Carl. He understood from the descriptions he carried that the pursy individual would be Bill Cassidy.

The paunchy man rapped: "Where'n thunder've you been? I've been hollerin' my head off!"

Fred imparted: "Heard a noise behind the barn and went to see about it, but couldn't find nothin' wrong."

"Yeah, we jes' stopped in to find out what's wrong," Cassidy mimicked. "We see a wagon come up here, an thet same rig jes' now pulls out. What was it doin' here? Been hearin' things 'bout you, Chuck. Looks like you're doublecrossin' us. You know the penalty fer doublecrossin', don'cha? We'll hafta fix you quick an' get after thet wagon."

FRED JACKSON'S hand tightened on a gun butt, and every muscle in his body tensed. He understood that Cassidy regarded Chuck as a traitor and had him slated for eternity. It meant a gun battle either way he represented himself.

"Save your tongue, Cassidy!" he rapped, sharp as a tack. "Lay off your guns! This is 4-Star Patrol talking!"

Only when clouds blazed could the men see each other. Rain began to pelt Fred's face. Thunder snapped close by. By a celestial glow, he saw the men flipping guns his way.

Hardly had darkness quenched the dazzling light before the gunmen cut loose. Fred's Colt sprayed lead, too. He aimed at powder flashes, but instantly after squeezing trigger, he side-stepped. This maneuver allowed the gunmen's lead a free passage, and aided his attacking the enemy from unexpected directions.

And then, suddenly, all went quiet. Fred held an empty gun. The affray had lasted but a minute. Nobody could see the result.

By a prolonged glare that lighted up the barnyard for a long second, Fred learned that the two slim killers were down. Cassidy had wheeled and vigorously spurred his horse down the trail in pursuit of the wagon. He was well on his way.

Fred thought: Three of his gang accounted for, but there are three or four more, besides their leader.

Fearful of what might happen to Jennie Carl, Fred reloaded his Colt as he hurtled for the saddled horse that stood near the barn. Within the space of a couple of long breaths, he had vaulted into the saddle and went splashing down the road.

Rain came down in sheets. The trail grew wet and slippery. The unshod horse's hoofs skidded dangerously. He proved to be a fast horse, but Fred had to hold him in. It would not do to let him fall on that slick ground and cripple himself, if not his rider.

Fred cursed softly under his breath. Neither Cassidy nor Jennie could be far ahead of him, and he felt vexed at the delay. Naturally, the logy team would not travel fast. Cassidy would soon overhaul it. Fred must catch him before that happened, or at least be present when it occurred.

After a half-mile or so had been covered, the rain slackened. The trail became sandy and not so slick. Fred urged for more speed, of which the horse held plenty in reserve.

Not much farther had he ridden before seeing a flash. It came from down the road a few rods, and a sixgun's crack quickly followed. Fred clutched his .45 and forced the horse to all the speed he could attain. A girl's scream smote the black air. A dusky bulk loomed up in the road, and more screams came in rapid succession.

When the wagon stood no more than fifty leaps ahead of Fred, a celestial streak revealed Bill Cassidy dragging Jennie Carl from its seat. Jennie mauled and fought viciously.

JUST before Fred reached the vehicle, another flash exposed Cassidy as he bolted down the road, with Jennie doubled across the horse in his fore.

Fred pulled up for a short inspection of the rig. Chuck still occupied its rear, his bonds and gag in perfect order. Dense darkness had obscured him from Cassidy's vision, but a hand poked under the seat, proved the money box had vanished.

The team, standing in the storm, acted fidgety and anxious to go. Fred felt sure the trusty, old horses would take the wagon safely to town. He wrapped the lines around the dash and started them along. Then he swung back into his saddle and forged ahead in pursuit of Cassidy.

Rain ceased and the moon broke through cracks in clouds. Fred encountered another stretch of slippery road. It required that the horse's speed be cut by half.

But he reasoned that Cassidy's horse carried two riders. It would not be able to cover ground rapidly under best of road conditions, and on slick tracks, would have to be held in. If Cassidy stuck to the main road, surely he would soon overtake him. But mile after mile slipped by and nothing happened. Maybe Cassidy had taken a short cut over the hills to town.

When Fred dashed into the outskirts of Bearcat Springs, clouds had slid away.

and a full moon hung nearly straight overhead. Windows in houses that he passed were black. He had not assigned any thought to time, but realized now that it must be after midnight.

He went directly to the courthouse. He considered reporting to the sheriff and soliciting help. Even at that hour, the sheriff usually would be there, but every window in his office shone black.

Of four saloons in town, only the Silver Buck splashed light into the street. Fred felt satisfied that Bill Cassidy would head for it. He did not believe Cassidy would kill Jennie, unless she made a break. She would be valuable to him for a slave. Most likely he would lock her in one of the saloon's rear rooms for temporary keeping.

Even if Cassidy had taken a short cut, he would not be far in Fred's lead. By quick work, Fred might rescue Jennie before she could be locked up. No time stood available in which to hunt help, so he must work alone.

He stepped down and tied the horse to a post in front of the courthouse, in perfect moonlight. Water dripped from his clothing and slopped from his boots at every step, but he had managed to keep his sixgun and cartridges dry.

He headed for the Silver Buck, which stood less than a block up the street. He had not gone far before the saloon's front door burst open. Jennie Carl streaked out, eyes and mouth wide, long, auburn hair waving. Cassidy clipped out after her, but his short, heavy legs could not match her speed.

"Stop 'er! Get 'er!" Cassidy whooped.

Fred Jackson's quick eyes took in the form of a man leaning against a building just ahead of him. Muscles tense, he flashed a glance across the street. Two more men were on the front porch of the general store. All three of them were holding guns that glistened conspicuously in the moonlight.

He shouted: "Look out, Jennie, turn to the left!"

But the warning came too late. Sixguns flared at the general store. Jennie screamed, spun half-around and collapsed in a rain puddle.

FRED JACKSON promptly drew down on the men who had fired the shots. Moonlight fell fully upon them. Hardly could he miss. One man accompanied the gun's bark with a hoarse yell and rolled off the porch. The other fellow ducked into shadows.

A bullet from the gent in front crashed through Fred's Stetson and smashed a courthouse window. Fred quickly swung his gun on him and let loose. The man grabbed his belly with both hands and pitched into the gutter.

The bandit who had slipped into shadows by the store came into view and triggered his Colt. A slug whistled a short solo in Fred's ear. Fred answered him with a clean miss. But he energetically crashed back into shelter.

Swearing like a round-up foreman, Bill Cassidy hurtled for his horse, tied to a rail across from the saloon. He lubberly scrambled into his saddle. Jabbing spurs to his horse's flanks, he raced up the muddy street, as Fred emptied his gun at him.

The problem of whether to assist Jennie or pursue Cassidy prodded Fred's brain, and then the sheriff straddled up to him, sixgun in hand. Evidently, he had gone to bed and the melee aroused him. "What's on? Who are you?" he demanded.

Fred flashed his star and said: "No time to explain now. Take care of that girl out there in the street. She might be purty bad hurt."

He then splashed toward his horse, reloading his gun as he ran. He snatched the reins loose and lunged into the saddle. The horse fogged up the slippery street, plowing up a shower of mud and water. He followed Cassidy's marks in the mud toward the hills.

When Fred Jackson overhauled the bandit, a short time later, he found himself on one side of an arroyo, with the outlaw on the other side.

(*Continued on page* 122)

Owlhoot Spawn —By Proxy

What was the grim secret of the rancher Bob Blake's parentage? What was the owlhoot tie-up? And most important—would it help Blake out of this terribly confusing matrimonial trap that threatened him?

"You dirty killers!" shouted Bob, cutting loose with his own lead.

THAT old debbil consequence had a strange hold on Bob Blake. The youngest owner of a big spread in Roaring River Valley was roped and hogtied. In one more week Bob Blake was due to be branded for life.

The sons of fifty other ranchers in the valley would have welcomed what Bob Blake tonight looked upon as a dire and soul-destroying fate. Hitching up as the life mate of Isabelle Crandon, the high-toned Eastern-school-finished daughter of Jasper Crandon, the banker at Crossville, wouldn't have been taken as a downright hardship by any other swain.

But the other eligibles didn't happen to be head over ears in love with the prettiest and the warmest-hearted girl in seventeen states. This same girl was just as deeply in love with Bob Blake.

She was Sally Merton, old John Merton's gal. Merton was Bob Blake's nighest neighbor and his house was only ten miles away, seeing that Bob Blake's Double V spread contained forty thousand acres and Merton's Pitchfork brand was run upon an equal acreage of Roaring River graze.

"I ain't sure how in tarnation she

By GEORGE L. THAYER

snagged me in her loop," muttered Bob Blake, staring morosely at the log blazing cheerfully in the immense stone fireplace. "Ain't ary recollection o' askin' Isabelle to marry me. Wasn't a dang bit of more than friendly when she come ridin' out to the Double V."

Bob Blake was only twenty-two. He had a heap to learn about women critters. He hadn't been a mite suspicious when the high-and-mighty and coldly beautiful Isabelle had led their palavers around to how much she loved young'uns, and the next thing Bob Blake knew, it appeared that the lovely Isabelle was talking about young'uns that would in due course of time and nature be the offspring of Mrs. Bob Blake, the same being Isabelle herself.

Bob wished old Uncle Billy would get back from the chore of patching a busted fence on an upper meadow. Bob's gray eyes were clouded now until they seemed almost black. Putting it cold-turkey, his engagement to Isabelle Crandon had been a sort of bushwhacking play.

But it was more than that. Jasper Crandon, the Crossville banker, held enough paper against the Double V to grab the spread almost any time he wanted to foreclose. This hadn't been brought up directly, but there it was nevertheless.

JASPER CRANDON was a proud man who greatly admired himself and what he boasted was a notable ancestry. Crandon had his name in the State's political hat and hoped to be roped in as the next candidate for the United States Congress.

Crandon wasn't a man to have his only beloved daughter's affections booted around by any son in Roaring River Valley. If the gushing and Eastern-finished Isabelle wanted Bob Blake, she would have the same, even if Jasper Crandon had to bring pressure upon the good-looking owner of the Double V.

"If I was the real owner of the spread," growled Bob into the blazing fire. "If it wasn't that Uncle Billy took me when I wasn't more'n a toddlin' calf an' hand-nursed me, and if it wasn't Uncle Billy built up the Double V, and me that got too big for my breeches an' run it into debt, Jasper Crandon could have the whole shebang."

Bob Blake meant every word of it. For he would have traded the forty thousand acres of the Double V any day to have shucked his one-sided engagement with the banker's daughter and to have ridden with Sally Merton to the marrying parson in Crossville.

But Bob couldn't trade off Uncle Billy, with his crippled leg, his ready good humor, and his twenty years of making a he-man out of Bob Blake. Not that Uncle Billy would ever say a word.

Not Uncle Billy, with his crooked nose where it had been broken, and the laughingest eyes on the Roaring River. To be sure, Bob had pushed the Double V ahead for the past few years, and he had pushed it into a debt that one good beef year would clean up. The present season had produced only a net loss.

Only it was Uncle Billy who had pioneered the land and scraped together the dinero to buy the first small bunch of cows. It was Uncle Billy who had ramrodded the spread and still did; and Billy had gunrodded the Double V on several occasions when rustlers had raided Roaring River Valley.

No. Bob Blake couldn't trade off Uncle Billy, even if it meant giving up Sally Merton. Bob knew Billy wouldn't have had it this way if he had known the downright truth. So Bob had kept from Uncle Billy the truth about Sally Merton.

"Ain't no two ways about it," Bob thought bitterly. "I'll hafta go through with it. Maybe it won't be so tough when Isabelle takes up housekeeping on the Double V an' gits some of that Eastern talk an' ways worn off her."

Which again proved how little young Bob Blake knew about women critters in general and the spoiled daughter of Jasper Crandon in par-

ticular. He was to have his eyes opened up on this same subject before many more hours passed.

BOB BLAKE was beginning to worry about the continued absence of Uncle Billy when the crash of shooting not far above the log-built ranchhouse brought him to his feet. Uncle Billy had given enough attention to Bob's gun-handling to enable Bob to determine instantly that only short guns were being used.

Because of the blackness of the night, there being only a reddish half moon over the valley, Bob knew the gun-smokers must be in a tight-up clash. His first thought was of Uncle Billy.

The bunkhouse was empty tonight. All the Double V riders not on night guard had trailed into Crossville, twenty miles away, because their monthly pay was scorching their pockets.

There had been no recent trouble with rustlers or between any of the ranchers in the valley. Bob was sorely puzzled as he snatched up his gun-belt and buckled the single .45 to his thigh.

Bob did not pause for a horse, the shooting being too close. Reddish slashes cut the night a little more than one hundred yards away, in a scrub-oak wind-break on the slant above the house.

As he ran toward the shooting, Bob had his first taste of hot lead from a stray bullet that burned across one cheek. Then he could make out four mounted figures. Bob turned a little sick when he became aware that Uncle Billy was shooting it out with three other hombres. For he heard Uncle Billy's high-pitched voice, a tone he never employed except when his mad was up.

"I told yuh, Cutter Lane, I'd split yore brisket if'n yuh ever come nigh the Double V!" rang out Uncle Billy's words. "I know yuh ain't wantin' to gun me down for keeps, 'cause I'd be no danged use to yuh in boothill."

"Bust the locoed coot outa the saddle!" yelled a hard voice. "An' we got to git ourselves outa here!"

Bob, still running, now gripping his .45, saw one rider spur his horse into the beast of another rider. The second rider went down with his rolling nag, and Bob knew it was Uncle Billy who was down.

"You dirty killers!" shouted Bob, steadying his hand and cutting loose with his own lead.

"Git goin'!" shouted the same hard voice. "I knowed yore damn' gun-smokin' would bring him some help! Hightail it! There's too much at stake to chance a clean shoot-out now! We'll be gittin' yuh, Collins!"

At that instant Bob's lead pitched one of the three attackers from his saddle. The remaining pair hit it out of there and there was no gunsmoke reply to Bob's shooting.

It didn't come to Bob then that the apparent leader of the three gunnies had been meaning Uncle Billy when he had said, "We'll be gittin' yuh, Collins."

Bob reached Uncle Billy first. Bob shuddered and was sick when he saw the warm blood trickling from Uncle Billy's thick gray hair into his eyes. He breathed more freely when he found Uncle Billy was breathing easily and that his heart was steady and strong.

Staunching the blood, Bob found that Uncle Billy's head had apparently been deeply cut by the blow of a gun butt instead of a bullet as he had feared. The gunnie he had shot from his horse uttered a gurgling groan.

BOB left Uncle Billy long enough to kneel beside the wounded gunnie. He struck a match. The blood was trickling from the corner of a mouth that seemed to be only a continuation of a scar that ran from

the man's left eye across his cheek. The gunnie's eyes were open and staring. Bob knew he was not seeing anything.

The man was dying and he was muttering in a delirium: "I tol' yuh, Cutter Lane, we allus got our dinero with our guns. I tol' yuh this wouldn't nohow work out. Buck Collins was allus a tough rooster and he's only got tougher as he got older."

It came to Bob then that when he had heard the name Collins spoken, the leader of the gunnies had appeared to be directing his words at Uncle Billy. He had no time, though, to worry about that now. He was more interested in the gunnie's mumbling hint that Cutter Lane was trying to take money without the use of his guns.

Then it was that Bob remembered where he had seen the name of Cutter Lane. It had been on a reward notice in Sheriff Callahan's office at Crossville. Bob recollected now that he had heard Cutter Lane often spoken of as one of the oldest and most notorious killers and robbers of that section of the Southwest.

The delirious muttering of the gunnie ceased suddenly. His head rolled a little sidewise. Bob knew then he was entirely free to take care of Uncle Billy. The gunnie was dead.

Bob was young and had tremendous strength. Yet he was surprised at the frailness, the lightness of Uncle Billy when he took him in his arms to carry him to the house. The meaning of this visit of Cutter Lane to the Double V, and the attack upon Uncle Billy, was still all confused in Bob's mind. His deep concern for Uncle Billy did not permit him to think clearly at the moment.

He was just stepping onto the porch of the long, log ranchhouse, when a rider came in off the trail to Crossville. With Uncle Billy still in his arms, and the light from the ranchhouse shining out through the open door, Billy paused. He had his second surprise of the night.

"Oh! What has happened, darling?" came the dulcet voice of Isabelle Crandon. "Has someone been hurt? Oh, goodness, it's Uncle Billy!"

ISABELLE CRANDON was an attractive figure in her riding costume. She came from the saddle, stepping lightly upon the porch. Her perfectly modeled face, which did not seem ever to have had a touch of the sun, turned a pale green in the light from the doorway.

"For heaven's sake, darling!" she cried out. "Take Uncle Billy inside. I never could stand the sight of blood. I think I'm going to faint!"

Bob Blake didn't wait to see if she fainted. He carried Uncle Billy quickly inside and put him before the fire. What he said under his breath sounded very much like "Dammit! Go ahead and faint!" Because that was exactly what he said.

Whether the lovely Isabelle had passed out, Bob didn't bother to notice. He hurried to get hot water and clean bandages. He got a pair of scissors and trimmed some of the thick hair from around the cut on Uncle Billy's head, after he had made certain that Uncle Billy had no other injury.

When he completed the bandaging of Uncle Billy's head, he was conscious that the coldly beautiful Isabelle had come into the big room and was sitting quietly in a cushioned chair in one corner. She was keeping her magnetic green eyes determinedly looking away from Uncle Billy. Somehow Bob Blake was not surprised.

When he had finished, Uncle Billy opened his eyes. He looked at Bob for a long minute before he spoke. Then he said, speaking slowly as though feeling out how much Bob might have seen or heard: "Did all them killers get away, Bob? They

was only a few o' them. I guess they was after that bunch of yearlin's down by the river. Must've been the same fellers outa Crossville. Some hard-cases there that would know most of our boys was in town tonight."

"Yes, Uncle Billy," said Bob. "All but one got away. "He stopped lead after he knocked you off your horse. Don't talk any more, Uncle Billy. I'll get you a swig of liquor and when you've had some sleep, you'll be fit as a fiddle."

Bob didn't miss the swift change that came over Uncle Billy's thin old face and the disappearance of the worry lines that had been there. Uncle Billy's bright blue eyes smiled at him. Somehow, Bob guessed, it was because Uncle Billy believed he had accepted his story of those supposed rustlers.

He carried Uncle Billy to his room and pulled the covers up close. Uncle Billy smiled at him. "We'll be havin' to switch rooms around, Bob, come another week or so," said Uncle Billy. "Was that Isabelle I see settin' over there in the big room, or was I kinda outta my head?"

"I guess, Uncle Billy," grinned Bob, "you was just kinda outta your head."

Isabelle was white-faced when Bob came back to the living room, but her tongue was as free and easy as usual.

"I'm so glad I rode out tonight, Bob darling," she gushed. "I just had to tell you the good news, and from what I've seen in the past few minutes, I know you'll be too. Once we're married and living in town, you won't be in any more danger from rustlers and outlaws."

"Living in town!" exclaimed Bob. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, darling, I had not mentioned it before," said Isabelle. "I wanted to be sure that we could get the big Thorsen place. Father bought the house this afternoon. It will be ready for us to move in next week. We'll have our honeymoon, darling, and then be right at home in Crossville. From then on, you can come out and oversee your ranch like a gentleman should."

"What the—!" Bob started to sputter and stopped when his lower jaw dropped.

"I don't know though," interrupted the loquacious Isabelle. "Perhaps we might first take a month's trip. You could go with me back East and have a chance to see the real cities and some of the real people."

"Just a minute!" cut in Bob. "I don't quite follow yuh, Isabelle! What do yuh mean by the real people?"

"Why, Bob darling! You should know what I mean. I'm talking about men and women who have education like I intend to see that you have. But we won't go into that tonight. I just wanted you to know about the Thorsen place because I knew you would be so pleased. I thought you would ride back with me to town."

Bob Blake stared at the still-blazing log in the fireplace. His future life had been mapped out all too suddenly. He could not quite take it all in one swallow. He knew, at the moment, he was down-right glad there was no one to leave with Uncle Billy and he could not ride back to Crossville with Isabelle. At the same time, with owlhooters like this Cutter Lane and the men with him on the prowl, he didn't think the girl should ride back alone. She might not be safe.

"I'm afraid, Isabelle, I'll have to put yuh up for the night here," he said with some hesitation. "Yuh heard what Uncle Billy said about the rustlers. Yuh might run into trouble."

"But Bob darling, do you think I should stay here?" The girl's tone was such that Bob felt his face growing red.

But he replied in a cold voice, "Yes. I think you should stay here."

THE FAIR and proper Isabelle was saved from being scandalized. Cowpokes Tacky Simms and Shorty Raner appeared, riding back from Crossville. Shorty Raner growled, but saddled a fresh mount to escort the banker's daughter back to town.

"It looks as if you really didn't want me to stay," sniffed Isabelle.

"It'd been all right with me," stated Bob. "But think what the neighbors would say."

When the banker's daughter was on her way, Bob Blake turned into a right proddy gent. For a few minutes he took it out in stalking up and down the living-room, muttering. His face was clouded and uneasy.

"Live in town . . . oversee my ranch like a gentleman should . . . meet the right people . . . gonna be eddicated!"

The matrimonial collar already was chafing and he hadn't yet put it on. Suddenly Bob halted in the middle of the room. When an idea hit Bob it never was permitted to lie around idle for long. This time, it hit him like a bolt from the blue.

"That's it!" he almost shouted. "That'll do it! I'll have Jasper Crandon out here mussin' up the knees of his striped pants an' beggin' me not to hitch up with his gal."

The idea was so big it took Bob's breath away. But within a minute he had a square of rough paper and a stubby lead pencil. By the light of the fire he slowly evolved this strange missive:

Jasper Crandon:

Ef yuh ain't wantin' folks to know yore datter is marryin' up with a wolf cub yuh will git five thousand simoleons an' have 'em reddy fer my man when he calls. I reckon even Bob Blake ain't knowin' it, but he is my lawful an' riteful son an' heir to my guns an' my rep. Yup. Yuh git the dinero reddy or I'm spillin' the truth an' I'll be clamin' a front seet at the weddin'. I reckon yuh've heerd o' me, the oldest an' most hunted gunslinger in the southwest.

Yores,
Cutter Lane Himself

Having blasted his ancestry in smeared and misspelled print, Bob Blake grinned at his artistic effort. He found a dirty, plain envelope and addressed it to Jasper Crandon.

"Crandon won't be spreadin' this around nowise," grunted Bob. "Wouldn't want Uncle Billy or Sally Merton to git hold of it."

Twenty minutes later he had Tacky Simms sleeping in the room with Uncle Billy. Bob sent his roan gelding hammering the trail toward Crossville.

It was but a little shy of daylight when Bob pushed his remarkable denunciation of his own really unknown ancestry into the postoffice mail slot at the general store. Jasper Crandon would have the startling missive with his morning mail.

Bob was bone-weary, but his heart was singing. He thought he might ride over and tell Sally Merton what he had done. But wiser judgment prevailed.

Bob would have been less sure of himself if he could have seen the little, piggish eyes in bearded faces that surveyed him from one ideal dry-gulching bend in the Crossville trail. One man had his Winchester trained upon Bob, when the other man caught his arm.

"Yuh dang fool!" grated the second hardcase. "There's thousands in him livin', but nary a cent if yuh cool 'im off. I been waitin' years fer this, an' him marryin' a banker's gal makes it turn out bigger'n than jest ownin' a cow spread."

Bob reached home, unsaddled, and went into the house whistling. He was totally unaware that he was no more master of his own fate than any other hombre. If he could have heard the conversation in that ambushing hide-

out, he would have been doubtful of the outcome of his desperately penciled blackmail note to Jasper Crandon.

JASPER CRANDON had the cutaway coat and the gray sideburns that he imagined he must have as a congressman, if ever elected. The side whiskers served to bring out the broad, ambitious mouth and the arching, aristocratic nose, or so Crandon viewed the nose.

Crandon strode up and down the Bob Blake porch as he talked, or rather harangued his prospective son-in-law.

"And you're telling me you knew nothing of your parents!" thundered Crandon. "Judging from the time you tell me this Uncle Billy picked you up, you *could* be the wolf cub of this bloody killer, Cutter Lane. Think! Think, young man! Think of what you've been about to do to me!"

"But when I didn't know, how could I think on what hitchin' up with Isabelle would be doin' to you?" grunted Bob. "What's Isabelle sayin' about this . . . this crude attempt to turn you against me?"

"Leave Isabelle out of this!" exploded Crandon. "She'll be thinkin' as I bid. Even if it isn't true, even the suggestion to my public may militate against my glorious opportunity to serve my country. Can't you see that, young man?"

"But if you pay off the five thousand as it says in that note, what you got to worry about?" asked Bob innocently.

Jasper Crandon clasped his white hands to his huge forehead and silently called upon the heavens to witness there couldn't be such dumbness in Roaring River Valley.

"I've said my say!" decided Jasper Crandon. "You're not to see or communicate with Isabelle again. I'll arrange for her to take a trip East. By that time, I'll plan it so you'll be off the Double V and out of the Roaring River country."

Bob felt the hackles rising at the back of his neck. His voice was as cold as a chisel cutting steel.

"You've about everything arranged, ain'tcha, Crandon? The only hitch in all that is I won't be fallin' in with any of your plans. Maybe so it's true I'm a wolf cub. But when any hombre, gunnie, or slick politician rides me out'n Roaring River Valley, he's gonna find hisself suddenly on the wrong end of guns slingin' hot lead."

"Why, you whippersnapper—you whelp of an owlhooter—you can't talk to Jasper Crandon like that!" blustered the outraged banker.

"If you're not ridin' in two minutes flat, I'll pers'nally take yuh off the spread by yore collar an' the seat of yore campaignin' pants!" promised Bob and took a stride toward the banker.

Jasper Crandon tried to maintain some dignity, but it was difficult after he jumped his saddle so quickly that he overshot the hull and had to pick himself up from the corral dust on the other side.

"I'm bettin' that done it," Bob thought, grimly turning back into the house.

Uncle Billy was standing in the doorway, a bandage tightly around his head.

"Appears as how Jasper Crandon is a heap put-out," twanged Uncle Billy. "Whadda yuh been doin' to rile Jasper thataway?"

"Didn't you hear?" said Bob, a little sick that Uncle Billy had stumbled into this.

"Eh? Whassay?" Uncle Billy was trying to push the bandage off one ear. "Can't hear a dang word anybody says with this fuzzy contraption tied onto my head. Hope yuh ain't went an' made Jasper Crandon mad at yuh."

"Maybe he is," muttered Bob to himself, glad Uncle Billy hadn't heard what had been said. "But there's

Isabelle still to be heard from, an' I'm thinkin' I'll be hearin' in spite of all Crandon's big talk."

BOB BLAKE saw Uncle Billy to bed with an order for him to stay quiet. Uncle Billy grumbled. He was irritable. The old man didn't like being out of things.

"I'm still hankerin' to find out what's the ruckus between you and Crandon," said Uncle Billy.

Bob had another inspiration. He lifted the bandage from over Uncle Billy's ear and he spoke very low and confidentially.

"It seems, Uncle Billy," he said, "that Isabelle's gone an' met up with some dude Eastern feller what Crandon thinks could do more helpin' him git him elected to Congress."

Uncle Billy nodded and muttered: "That's Crandon for yuh, Bob. But don't let that bust your heart."

Bob would have been greatly interested, as he turned away, to see the little smile on Uncle Billy's face and to hear Uncle Billy whisper: "The lyin' young whelp! After he went an' told Crandon what he did and turns right aroun' and lies to me about it."

Bob turned in and caught some shuteye during the afternoon. Early in the evening, he followed a hunch. "Better to meet Isabelle Crandon in Crossville than to risk havin' her descend upon the Double V and have Uncle Billy hear too much," he thought.

Bob pushed his roan for town. It was later than most women were abroad on the dusty streets of Crossville, but Bob Blake had a stroke of luck. He saw Isabelle Crandon just climbing aboard her pony. He made an even bet with himself that she was headed for the Double V although it was nigh on to midnight now. He strode across the street and confronted her.

The girl's face was deathly white in the light of the general store. She slipped from the saddle and fairly threw herself into Bob's arms.

"Bob, darling," she sobbed. "If you think I'm letting my father break up our romance, you're guessing away wrong. Bob, I want you to go away with me! Right away! I'll be ready by tomorrow night. We can take the evening stage East. We'll be married at the first town stop!"

"Now, now, Isabelle!" Bob said softly. "You wouldn't want to be doin' that to your own father?"

"I don't care!" she cried out. "He can't be changing my life around to suit his political plans. He has invented a crazy story of you being the son of some outlaw and killer called Cutter Lane."

"He didn't invent it," said Bob quietly. "It happens to be the downright truth."

But even that didn't drive the girl from his arms. "I don't care!" she said. "You're going away with me tomorrow night. Once we're married, he'll come around. I could always twist him around my little finger."

A precise, dignified voice spoke from the darkness on one side: "Money's exactly what you *won't* have, Isabelle!" Jasper Crandon walked into view. "I expected something like this," he said. "I'm telling you, my daughter, and you, Bob Blake, that if there's an elopement, you will each be hitched up with a pauper. Isabelle won't have a cent! You won't have your ranch!"

PERHAPS Bob Blake was a heap smarter than he knew himself to be. He said: "Crandon, you're cuttin' it mighty fine. Too damn' fine! Suppose that I was willin' to run off with your gal, which I ain't, and supposin' you do as you say about cuttin' off her money and grabbin' off my ranch, then do a little more supposin' that I personally see that the Crossville *Weekly Banner* gets the whole lowdown, includin' me bein' a wolf cub

of Cutter Lane, an' your cuttin' off your gal's rightful inheritance."

"Stop it!" commanded Crandon. "You wouldn't dare!"

"I haven't a thing to lose," stated Bob. "But when that story's spread around the district, just what chance do you think you'd have of bein' elected to Congress?"

For once in a long life of maintaining the family dignity, Jasper Crandon stood stupefied and silent. Then, just as Bob hoped she would, Isabelle showed herself for what she really was. She ran to her father and threw her arms around him.

"I wouldn't want anything to happen to you, father!" she cried out.

Jasper Crandon came a few steps closer to Bob. He spoke lower. "I'll make a deal with you, Bob Blake if you'll just forget all this and forget Isabelle. I'll cancel off half the notes on the Double V and extend the time on all the others."

Isabelle looked from Bob to her father. The girl was not fooling Bob Blake. She hadn't the slightest idea of becoming a romantic pauper and before she could voice it, Bob spoke tersely: "It's a deal, Crandon. I'll want it in writing. Will we go over to your bank?"

Isabelle broke then. "You're the cheapest, the most insufferable man I've ever known! You've got the smell of the cow ranch all over you! You'll never get it off!"

Bob Blake's smile, then, was all inside. He knew the cold, ambitious girl was simply covering up her own selfishness. Perhaps she was already planning for some other alliance.

"It's agreed then," said Jasper Crandon, opening the door of the bank, a note of relief in his voice. "This goes through only if Isabelle is really telling the truth and she leaves tomorrow for a long visit to the East."

Ten minutes later, Bob Blake almost felt sorry for Jasper Crandon. The cold features of his daughter had not really changed. Bob judged that the girl had not loved him any more than she could ever love any other man. She loved only herself and she wanted someone over whom she could wield complete power.

"You go on home, Isabelle," said Crandon heavily. "I'll be along as soon as we finish this business."

THE banker was producing the packet of Double V notes from the safe.

"Now that Isabelle is gone," said Bob. "never mind that play about canceling notes. Uncle Billy and I pay our debts. We're askin' only the customary consideration of time."

Greedy cunning appeared in Crandon's eyes.

"If you're wantin' to be high and mighty, and live down the rep wished onto you when you were born, I'll be glad to help you out," said Crandon.

Yes, thought Bob. And if the market goes bad this year, you will be much more pleased to help yourself out and grab off the Double V.

The exchange between them was abruptly broken. Boot heels ground into the floor near the street door. The same hard voice that Bob Blake had heard after the flash of gunplay only the night before rapped out with unmistakable menace:

"Freeze! Push yore paws up an' don't make any other move!"

Bob put up his hands promptly as a grayish pallor painted the heavy face of Jasper Crandon. Crandon was prompt reaching for the air above his head.

Bob turned far enough in his chair to see the bulk of the man who was holding a pair of guns upon them. The owlhooter's face was covered by a thick black beard, shot with gray.

"What do you . . . do you want?" stuttered Crandon.

It seemed obvious enough what this

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Rattlesnake Crew

By RALPH SEDGWICK DOUGLAS

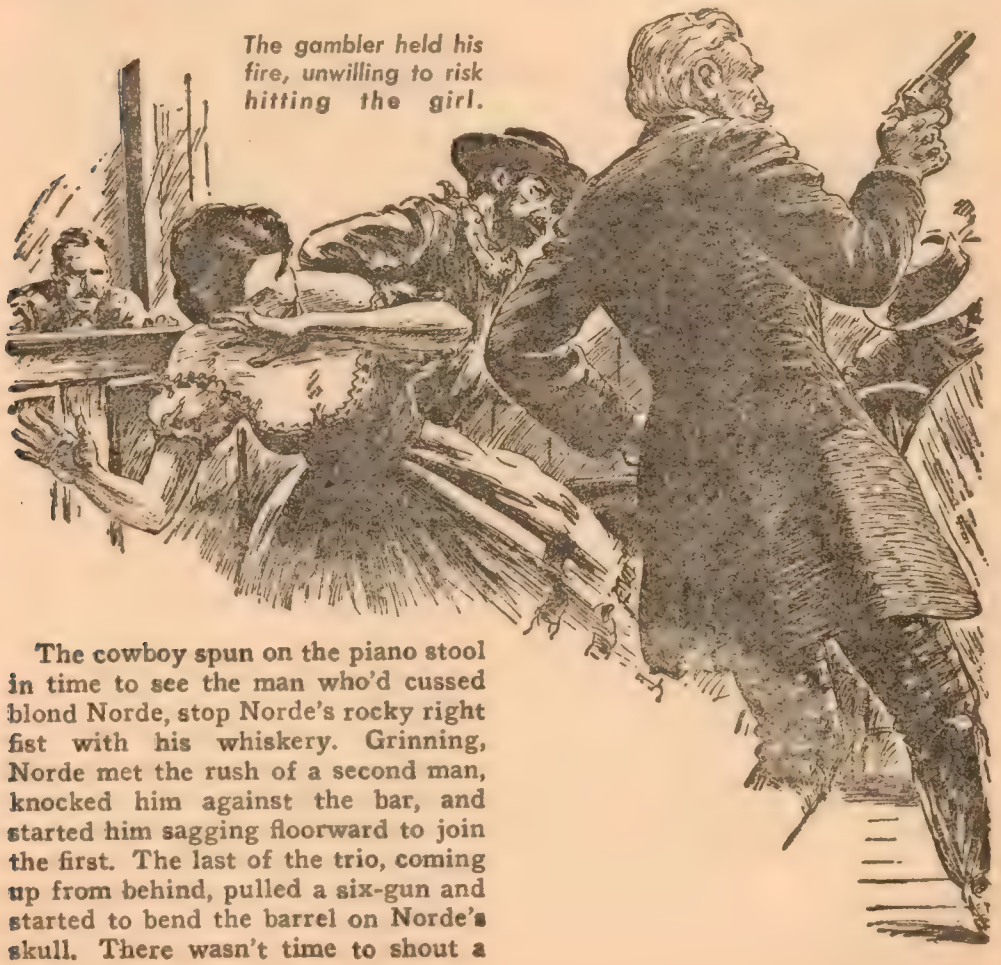
A STRANGER in Hempnoose Gulch, the cowboy was punching the saloon piano when an argument between four men at the bar reached a climax. "Dispute my right to the claim and *pssst* to you and all the rest of your thieving, murdering vigilantes," one of them, a stocky, blond young man harshly hooted. "And that goes for your murdering marshal, too!"

"Norde, you bald-faced son—"

warning. The cowboy, dragging a single-action .45 out of the waistband of his pants, did his shouting with a shot that broke the man's upraised arm.

That was how tall, dark Beaudry Shea and blond Jack Norde first met.

Side-by-side, they were standing with their backs to the bar when King Crass, the marshal and law of the diggings, plunged into the saloon. Like Norde, Crass was blond and stocky, and their features were somewhat



The gambler held his fire, unwilling to risk hitting the girl.

The cowboy spun on the piano stool in time to see the man who'd cussed blond Norde, stop Norde's rocky right fist with his whiskery. Grinning, Norde met the rush of a second man, knocked him against the bar, and started him sagging floorward to join the first. The last of the trio, coming up from behind, pulled a six-gun and started to bend the barrel on Norde's skull. There wasn't time to shout a

They called themselves Vigilantes, but they were nothing but a gang of cutthroats, sluice-robbers and claim-jumpers. What's more, the marshal himself was the leader of this bunch of rascals.

alike. There the resemblance ended. Crass's eyes were soulless, his expression that of a conscienceless killer.

The six-shooter in Beau Shea's hand, the sooner-shoot-than-not expression he wore, warned Crass to go easy. Fuming, he was careful to keep his hands away from his two holstered Colts.

"Norde called the Vigilantes murderers and thieves," the wounded man croaked. "Said so was you, too. I jest aimed to bust up the fight when this stranger hopped up an' shot me."

"What you call the Vigilantes is their business," Crass threw at Norde. "I got nothing to do with them. But what you call me is my business, and I'm warning you to keep your damn' mouth shut.

"As for you, stranger, get the hell

out of Hempnoose Gulch before I take a notion to shoot you, or the Vigilantes get you," he hissed at Shea. "Get going right now!"

Exchanging glances, Norde and Shea walked out, but went no further than the next saloon. There, over drinks, Norde told Shea that good gold claims were hard to get and hell to hold. Norde had won a good one in a poker game and Crass wanted it. More so since the diggings had begun to play out. So Crass's men disputed Norde's right to the claim, making trouble so they could kill him for it.

King Crass, Norde went on to relate, had hit Hempnoose like a plague. He shot the marshal and took his badge, and then a bunch of cutthroats, sluice-robbers, and claim-jumpers had been organized in the guise of law-enforcing Vigilantes. Most men, while afraid to say so, knew King Crass was the monarch of that rattlesnake crew.

"A few weeks ago, we'd both be dead for what we just did," Norde said. "Now, the miners are desperately dangerous, meaning to keep what gold is left to pan out here. Crass and his Vigilantes must step more carefully, but they're still to be feared."

"Only," Shea drawled, "you ain't the kind to be fearful."

"Foolish, though, because I can't hold on and work the claim alone," Norde said. "But—well, until just awhile ago, I'd never met a man I liked enough to ask him to be my partner all the way."

"Until just awhile ago," Shea responded, "I'd never met a man I wanted to ride the whole length of the river with, either."

THE first week of the partnership between Beau Shea and Jack Norde, Shea groaned and cussed his aching back, wet feet, and big blisters he got shoveling gravel into a sluice on the claim up on Padre Creek. No gold, he swore, was worth such labor. Not once, though, did he consider saddling and riding on because, during that week, each man became positive he'd found in the other the pard he'd been needing and would stick to until hell froze plumb over.

Neither man, though, gave up head unduly fast. They figured they had years ahead for that. Shea told how his father had been a fighting Irish lawman who was killed in a Montana gun-battle. His mother, a convent-bred French-Canadian, had tried to teach her son the three Rs and piano. She'd gone to join the kid's dad while Beau Shea was still a younker.

"After that," Shea said, "I meandered, got in an' out of a few scrapes, punched cows, fought sheepmen, an', because I was handy with my gun, tried deputy-sheriffin'. Liked it. Got love of it from my dad, I reckon. But I quit when I refused to string with the high sheriff in dirty politics an' had to wing the old devil. When I heard of this gold business, it came to me I hadn't tried it, so I lit a shock for California."

Norde, in turn, revealed he had folks back east, but hadn't seen them since drifting westward several years ago. He vaguely mentioned some trouble he'd had just prior to coming to Hempnoose Gulch. Shea judged, from the way he talked, and the way he sometimes didn't answer when his name was called, that his right name wasn't Jack Norde, either. Shea reckoned Norde would get around to telling that when he was in the mood and their partnership had been of a longer duration.

It didn't last that long.

THEY were sitting in their cabin a few nights later, when they heard sounds of a bunch of men coming up Padre Creek. Tuned for trouble, Shea blew out the lamp and got his Colt; Norde got his rifle and they took places at the sides of the doorway.

"Norde, this's Peters an' his pards,"

a man called from out of the darkness. "We know yuh're there because we seed the light."

"I'm here, Pete—but there's more than three of you there."

"Norde, it's the Vigilantes," Peters yelled. "When we went down to Hempnoose an' told Crass we saw yuh run away after robbin' our sluice, these vigilantes heard of it an' come a-hellin'."

"Saw me run after robbing your sluice? Pete, you're crazy!"

"Yuh're the one's crazy, Norde. We never thunk it of you—of all men!—but it wasn't so dark yit we couldn't see it was you run away. So you an' yuh pard might's well come out an' face trial."

"Pete, I know you and your pards are honest, but you're mistaken." Norde sounded perplexed. "I didn't rob your sluice, and we won't come out to be strung up so Crass can have our claim."

"Crass ain't here, an' ain't got ary to do with it," someone, not Peters, barked. "Three men saw you leave the robbed sluice, an' we gotcha s'rounded. Come on out or we'll come in after you."

"Have at 'er!" Shea roared, and slammed a slug in the direction of the voice just before Norde slammed the door shut.

A mineful of lead struck the tiny log cabin, then. Bullets chewed through the door, ripped the hide over the single window opening and drove through the chinking from all sides. Shea didn't hear the slug strike Norde; heard nothing but the beating and slapping of lead as he hugged the clay floor.

"Jack?" Shea called. "Jack, I got 'er figured out. Crass wanted honest miners to swear against you—havin' to be careful, these days, like you said. He made big on the fact you an' him look somewhat alike, especially from a distance. Damn him, it was Crass robbed that sluice an' made sure he was seen runnin' away! You savvy, Jack? . . . Hey, Jack?"

Crawling, feeling around, Shea touched Norde's head and jerked his hand away, glad he couldn't see that shattered mess, while the firing from outside reached an even greater pitch. It held Shea pinned to the floor while a vigilante ran up and threw a blazing pitch-pine torch up onto the dry shakes of the roof.

Shea didn't wait for the flames to spread and roast him out. Sobbing, cussing, he crawled to the door, jerked it open and came out running. A man loomed in front of him, six-gun winking. Shea's Colt slobbered flame, a devil died screaming, and Shea ran on. He was at the edge of the creek when a slug drove into his back, tore out under his ribs and hurled him headlong into the water.

SHEA was conscious of very little thereafter. He had a vague knowledge of running, falling, climbing to his feet, and reeling onward again. It wasn't fear that drove him, but blind, unconscious rage. He didn't know it when he left Padre Creek and went crawling up ridges and rolling down the other side. He knew nothing more till he regained consciousness a week later and found that he'd been found with his Colt still clutched in his hand, and taken in and hidden by some Chinese who were working over some abandoned diggings far out of Hempnoose Gulch.

Those poor, mistreated Chinese saved Shea's life, but there was little they could tell him. He'd been in bed a month when he learned that Hempnoose was almost played out, and that King Crass had just quit the gulch as suddenly as he'd appeared there. Two weeks after that, weakened and gaunt, his eyes hot pools of bitter determination, Shea made his way into Sacramento on the first leg of a journey he'd sworn would end only when

King Crass or Beau Shea, or both, were dead.

Crass, Shea wasn't long in learning, was known as one to take over a booming place, clean up, drop out of sight, and then reappear months later and thousands of miles away when some other place got good. Shea heard that from an old bartender who was bumming a ride out of Kansas in the same freight car Shea was in.

"That reptile, Crass," the old barkeep snarled. "He ruined a boom town I once owned a saloon in. It happens you're hunting him, you'd better be in a town to meet him when he arrives, and have at him before he gets things organized and running his way."

"Ahead of him?" Shea thought bitterly. "I can't even find where he's gone so I can get there after him. . . . But I will!"

Eight months of seeking, of odd jobs and piano playing in frontier town honk-atonks lay behind Shea, then, when he got off the train in Gehenna. He'd heard that this town on the new railroad across the Hades Basin range was all that its name implied, and his first impression was in agreement.

Heat rolled out of the sun-baked earth, the smell of cattle and sheep in loading pens mingled with the odor of perspiring men as cowmen, sheepmen, hoemen, and boomtown buzzards milled around the new depot and thronged the plank walks along the short main street. Hooves and iron-tired wheels and booted feet kept stifling clouds of dust hanging in the air, and there sounded yells and laughter and snatches of music—the pattern of a wild town coming alive for the night.

Lean-faced and wolfish, Shea stood scanning the faces of the crowd when his attention suddenly centered on a girl standing with her back against the depot. Small she was, with a tiny waist and slender figure, and the honey-gold hair under her little bonnet framed a wistful, timid little face. She seemed very much out of place here—like a cameo set in slag.

Her eyes long-lashed and large, the girl looked back at Shea, took a hesitant step toward him and peered through the dust and deepening dusk. Shea became very conscious of his scuffed boots, his mismatched, soiled coat and pants and ragged hat and the dark stubble of beard on his face. His feeling was one of both relief and regret when the girl, her color deepening, turned and hurried around the depot. Unconsciously, Shea took a step after her.

"Whoa." A cowpuncher stepped in front of him. "It ain't my affair, but I can see you must be new here. Don't fix yourself to stay forever by botherin' Beryl Dorne. She's Joel Wolfe's gal."

Shea nodded and walked out to the street. He felt let down. Judging by the puncher's words, Joel Wolfe was top-gun and tough, and Beryl Dorne was his—Could be his daughter, couldn't she?

"An' I could be crazy." Shea answered his own question.

ON THE sidewalk, Shea drifted with the growing crowd, then out of it at the upper end of the street. Crossing over, he stopped beside an old man who was hanging a lighted lantern at the entrance to a wagon-yard and corral. Seeing Shea, the oldster offered, "Bet odds it's shot out afore the night's an hour older."

"Couldn't take a bet." Shea grinned. "But I could sure use a lantern an' a bucket of water if you'd let me have 'em."

"Come along." The old man led Shea to his diggings in a feed-house. There, Shea washed, pulled his razor out of his pocket, made a lather with yellow soap and began shaving. While that tortuous business went on, he asked a few questions and the hostler answered them. Shea learned that Joel

Wolfe was considered quite a man. He owned the Wolfhead, which was the largest saloon and gambling hall in Gehenna. Wolfe sold good liquor and ran straight games and his entertainers were the best to be afforded. This had forced other places to follow suit—some, however, very unwillingly.

"Town ain't so tough's it might be, considerin'," the hostler said. "Wolfe backs up the marshal an' his depity, y'see. Joel Wolfe is a handy gent with a gun, an' he uses it when he hasta."

Face stinging, but feeling cleaner and better, Shea thanked the old man and went back down the street. Outside the Wolfhead, he was caught in a tide of men surging through two entrances and he flowed with it into smoky bedlam. Ornate bars on opposite sides of the place were crowded, as were tables around a dance floor where, on a platform, a burly jasper sat mauling a piano. Beyond an archway in the rear, Shea glimpsed gambling tables and layouts. Food was served at the end of one bar. He shouldered his way toward it.

Finding an opening, Shea wedged in beside a tall, white-haired, gambler-garbed man who wore a white mustache and goatee. When the counter attendant came along, Shea, mindful of his last three dollars, ordered, "Bring me whatever's the most of for a buck," then grinned wryly at the gambler, who smiled back at him. Shea didn't see that man's meaning look at the counterman, and was amazed at the amount of good grub he got for his dollar.

Shea was swallowing the last bite when he became aware that the noise was diminishing. Turning, he looked toward the piano platform and saw why: Beryl Dorne had come out and was standing up there, a hanging lamp making a halo of light around her hair. Her hands clasped before her, a wistful smile on her lips, she looked like an angel that hadn't quite grown up. Men ceased talking and the twitter-titter of dancehall girls ceased. The silence was more acclaim than any wild outburst that might have greeted the girl.

In a voice that was untrained, but soft and sincere and right for the ballad she offered, Beryl Dorne began singing. The old song was, perhaps, soggy with laid-on sentiment, but the clientele loved it. Remembering homes they'd once known, mothers who'd sung those songs, tough men sniffled and shrewd hussy eyes dimmed with tears. Beryl sang three of those songs, the last two titles humble requests by the listeners, and when she was finished they yelled and stomped and called for more, though most of them knew she'd sing no more that night. Smiling, making a little curtesy, Beryl stepped down.

AT A TABLE near the platform, a drover whose eyes were red with trail dust and liquor, kicked back his chair. Slapping away the restraining hands of his companions, he strode over, blocked Beryl's way and rasped, "Yuh ain't done yit. We bin a long time 'thout fun, but we're paying fer it now an' mean to git it. Climb back up an' sing 'til we git enough." He grasped her arm to turn her.

"Don't touch her!" the piano player roared. Fist swinging, he lunged off the platform at the drover. Leaping backward, the drover pulled his hogleg.

The white-haired gambler at Shea's side cursed and plunged toward the piano and Shea charged after him along the the path the man elbowed and kneed through the crowd that was packing down trying to scramble out of the vicinity of gunplay. Shea heard the drover's shot, saw the gambler whip a gun out of a hip-pocket holster, and tore buttons off his shirt getting at his own .45 in his waistband. The piano player was down.

The drover wheeled, backed toward Beryl and threw down on the old gambler.

Six-gun lifted for a shot, the gambler held his fire, unwilling to risk hitting the girl. It was in that instant that meant death for the man that Shea, also fearing to shoot because of the girl, yelled and dived headlong at the drover. Startled, hit at the knees just as he let go, the drover chopped his shot into the floor at the gambler's feet and went down on his stomach as Shea slid clear under and beyond him. Rolling over before Shea could stop sliding, the drover was throwing down on Shea when the gambler's gunbarrel crashed down on his head and knocked him icehouse cold.

"A killin', Mister Wolfe?" Art Galt, Gehenna's town marshal yelped as he and his deputy rushed up to the white-haired gambler.

So *he* was Joel Wolfe? Stuffing his gun back under his shirt, Shea was happy that he was. And he was glad that he hadn't accepted the implication of the puncher's ill-chosen words at the depot.

Wolfe looked at the piano player, who had one hand pressed to a bullet-broken collarbone. "No killing," he answered the marshal's question. "Would've been mine, hadn't been for this stranger, here."

"Thet jasper moved fast as ol' Satan a-ronnin' from a dippin' in holy water," a nearby Texan said admiringly of Shea.

"He did," Wolfe agreed, then raised his voice and called out, "Drinks on the house, folks. Compliments of—" he looked at Shea, who, embarrassed, gave his name "of Beaudry—Beau—Shea."

The crowd headed for the bars, the drover and piano player were taken away, and Wolfe said, "Shea, consider this place yours."

"I stood rooted in my tracks like a ninny," Beryl apologized. "I want to thank you, Mr. Shea. I never dreamed when I saw you at the depot that our next meeting would be like this."

So she'd remembered him and figured on a next meeting. Holding the tiny hand she offered, Shea felt like he'd swallowed a currycomb. Dazedly, he looked down at Beryl, and there was something of his own feelings revealed in the look she gave him in return.

"A-harrum." Wolfe cleared his throat. "Shea, you must let me do something for you in order to keep from being so indebted to you."

"Well, you need a piano player an' I need a job," Shea said.

"You play? You'll take the job? Oh, good!" Beryl cried.

Stepping up on the platform and sitting down at the piano, Shea felt less grim, happier than at any time since that night on Padre Creek. Pouring on the chips, he fired up "Buffalo Gals" in a manner that brought men and their short-skirted companions on a stampede to the dance floor.

"Isn't he fine?" Beryl sounded enraptured and Wolfe knew how it was. It had been the same when he and the girl he'd married had first met, except that Wolfe, even as a river-boat gambler, had some substance to offer a girl. Shea, Wolfe shrewdly judged, had only a mixture of hot blood, a six-gun, and the will and skill to use it.

BERYL, a cloak thrown over her shoulders, was waiting with Wolfe when Shea, refusing to play "Buffalo Gals" again, came down off the platform. "I waited to say good night," she said, "and ask if you'd come in and run over some songs with me in the morning."

There was only one answer to that. Togged in new clothes he'd bought with money Wolfe had insisted on advancing him, Shea went to the Wolfhead next morning. He'd been

sitting at the piano only a short while when Beryl arrived accompanied by a gray-haired woman. Greeting Shea, Beryl said she'd been down to meet the train going back up the line, then introduced the other woman as Mrs. Wolfe.

"I live with the Wolfes," Beryl explained.

"Joel means a lot to me, and I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am for what you did last night," Mrs. Wolfe said. She shook Shea's hand while she appraised him—this piano-playing rover in whom Beryl had become so interested.

"Well," she said, sounding as though she might be somewhat satisfied, "I'll leave you two to do your practicing."

Untying the ribbon bow under her chin, Beryl put her bonnet on the piano and sat in the chair Shea had placed close to his. They tried a song, playing and singing softly for each other's ears alone, and the few customers at the bar politely ignored them.

"We don't need much practice together, do we?" Beryl smiled.

"More ways than one, we hit it off together right from the start," Shea answered. "It seems like it was meant for us to meet."

"I can thank my brother, Donald, that we have," she told him. "I'm hunting him. That's how I happen to be here. Mother and Don and I lived back East, and Don came West several years ago. He wrote and sent mother money until less than a year ago, then ceased writing. Mother died, and letters I mailed to Don's last known address were returned. It occurred to me that Don, for some reason or another, might have changed his name, too. He's all I have, so I set out to find him. I worked at different jobs, finally getting one singing and acting small parts with a traveling stock company and medicine show that stranded here. Joel Wolfe gave me a job and took me home to live with him and his wife. They've been like parents to me."

"An' that's why you watch trains," Shea said.

"As you watch men's faces in here," Beryl added.

There it was. Shea could duck it or get it over with, and he bluntly said, "I'm huntin' a man to kill him," and went on to tell how he'd knocked around as a younker but never had a real pard till he met Jack Norde. He told how Norde had died on Padre Creek, and wound up saying, "So, until I find Crass an' kill him, or he kills me, there's no life for me outside of huntin' him. No steady job, no home, because a man can't ask a girl to marry him when he's in my kind of boots. I couldn't, anyway."

"A girl can wait." Beryl stared down at her hands, folded in her lap. "But you might consider that you'd known Jack Norde such a short while, perhaps your purpose really isn't your duty?"

"Time means nothin'." Shea shook his head. "I've known you a lot less time than I knew Jack, yet I'd kill the man that even blew a breath of harm your way. A pard's a pard, an' I cottoned to Jack the instant I set eyes on him. In a way, except the feelin' was different, it was like the first time I saw you down at the depot."

"However things turn out, then, they'll be easier," Beryl softly said. "Although we're both still hunting someone, we've also both found someone and have that to look forward to."

IN THE following days, Shea agreed with her. He had a duty to perform if he was to live at peace with himself throughout his life. It was a comfort to think that, when that duty was done, there'd be something fine beyond it. And if he didn't come through alive, he'd had these days with Beryl, and the evenings escort-

ing her home—a privilege Wolfe had relinquished in Shea's favor.

Shea hated to think that King Crass might not come to Gehenna. But, as long as Gehenna was booming, there was hope that he would. As long as some men hated Wolfe because they had to follow his example of fair dealing, as long as the law holding the town under thin control was such a flimsy thing, that long was there reason to believe that Crass might come and try to take the town over, and Shea wouldn't have to leave Beryl and go hunting Crass again.

That was the day Shea prayed and hoped for. He hoped as he scanned the faces in the Wolfhead, and when he went with Beryl to meet the trains. Always, though he stopped across the street and let her go on over to the depot by herself. Shea figured it would be better, in case her brother did get off a train one day, if they had their first meeting strictly to themselves. Too, he didn't want Beryl close to him in event one of those trains brought King Crass.

This morning, when they went to meet the train from far down at head-of-track, thunderheads were banked and the air was hot and still. There was an electric tension in the air, and the Hades Basin seemed to be waiting for something grim and deadly to transpire. As usual, Shea said, "Good luck this time," and stopped on the corner, admiring Beryl as she crossed the street to the depot. Rolling a smoke, Shea was hoping the fates would send Don Dorne or King Crass today, when the train pulled in. The first passenger that got off was a stockily-built man with his hat pushed back on his blond hair and two six-guns riding low-holstered against his thighs!

"Don, ohhh, Don!" Beryl's cry rang loudly in the pre-storm silence, and the color left Shea's face. Her arms held wide and outstretched, Beryl was running toward King Crass!

No wonder Dorne had changed his name. No man would want his true name damned with the things the name of Crass had come to mean.

Shea's world rocked, and a great void seemed to have taken the place where his stomach had been. He was not aware that he was walking blindly back up the street until the sound of two gunshots beyond the depot snapped him out of his daze. Turning, Shea saw Ed Rhee, Marshal Galt's deputy, run around a corner of the depot. Holding one hand to a bleeding side, Rhee gasped, "A gunnie kilt Galt an' shot me!" as he ran past Shea and on toward the Wolfhead to get Joel Wolfe.

Crass was losing no time starting to take over, Shea thought. A mad-wolf expression on his face, dimly aware that men were getting off the street, Shea stood on the sidewalk alone, watching the corner of the depot. Thunder rumbled jarringly. The storm soon would break, and when Crass came up this street, another one was going to be unleashed.

Shea tried not to think of Beryl. She must be sickened by the man her brother had turned out to be, but he still was her brother and she'd be just as sickened of Shea if he shot her brother down.

Shea made a growling sound when Crass came around the corner of the depot, Art Galt's badge pinned to the left lapel of his coat. Crass hadn't holstered his six-guns, but held them dangling at his sides, thumbs on the hammers. Shea drew his Colt and let his arm hang down so his body concealed the weapon from Crass's view.

Stepping up onto the end of the sidewalk, darting glances to right and left, Crass's slow, heavy tread boomed on the planks. His eyes squinted at Shea, Crass stopped a little distance from him. His hatbrim pulled low on his forehead, Shea stood motionless in the center of the walk. Puzzled Crass hesitated, then boomed in a voice that

announced his name along the street, "You, fella. State your aims toward King Crass—Gehenna's new marshal and law."

"You'll know what they are," Shea barked. Letting Crass see the six-gun dangling in his hand, a quick upsweep of his left arm pushed back his hatbrim and allowed Crass to see his face as well.

SURPRISE jarred Crass's mouth open. Catching his breath, he roared, "You—fool!" as he crooked his elbows and jerked his six-guns up to bear on Shea.

The muzzle of Shea's Colt tilted upward and he let the arched hammer slip from under his thumb. Crass staggered, sending a shot into the air, another into the walk. Shea lifted his Colt hip-high, kept his eyes on a spot just to the right of the badge on Crass's coat lapel and let the gun's hammer fall a second time.

King Crass spun off the sidewalk and piled down in the dusty street, a limber, lifeless shape that quivered but otherwise didn't move. A breathless silence, in that moment, crushed in on Gehenna like a real and weighty thing, then came a sound like a herd of sheep running on hard-packed ground and the rain came down in huge, smashing, blinding blobs.

Unmindful of the deluge, Shea stepped off the walk and crossed the street and shuffled to the hotel where he kept a room. He went into the little lobby and folks there stood aside, saying nothing as they watched him heavily climb the stairs. In his room, then, he moved torpidly as he gathered up his razor and a few personal belongings. Hell, he felt, couldn't be worse than the state he was in. He didn't even have the incentive of hunting a killer to make life worthwhile now. All he had was the grim, mocking knowledge that the man he'd killed would forever stand between him and Beryl.

Shea's door was pushed open. Joel Wolfe and Beryl, both dripping wet, stood on the threshhold. Pushing past Wolfe, the girl cried, "Oh, Beau, you've ended that trail!"

"An' it had to be your brother," Shea croaked. "I knew what it meant, but I had to do it. There's nothing else to be said."

"My—but, Beau, he wasn't my brother. He looked like Don, until I got close to him and saw his cruel mouth and eyes. Then I knew that he wasn't, but he grabbed me and tried to kiss me in order to bait Marshal Galt into drawing a gun so he could shoot him. Beau, I thought you saw all of that?"

Shea shook his head, and mumbled, "An' you mistook Crass for your brother, Don, just like folks mistook him for Jack Norde. Norde an' Dorne. Why, it's just a change-around in the letters, an' all the rest of it's clear now!"

"Beau," Beryl gasped, "do you mean that Jack Norde, who looked like Crass, and my brother, who also looked like him—?"

"Your brother, Don, an' my pard, Jack, were the same man," Shea finished, taking her wet little figure in his arms.

There couldn't be as much grief in learning of the death of a brother one hadn't seen in years, as there'd be joy in finding the way open to the love of the man who'd killed that brother's killer. Joel Wolfe knew that, and knew that joy was the biggest reason for Beryl's tears. As for Shea, he looked like a man who'd been pitchforked out of hell into Paradise.

"A-harrum." Wolfe cleared his throat and hastened to get in a few words while Beryl still sobbed with her head against Shea's chest. "Shea, Beryl's said you told her you'd once been a lawman for a spell, and had a taste for it if ridden straight. Gehenna

(Continued on page 125)

By
FRED MAUREL

BADLANDS BLOOD TRAP

"RIGHT OFF, Mert Hauser opined to himself, I'm the thickest headed hombre he's ever snagged into payin' two thousan' cash dinero, an' signin' a year's note for the Los Palino mesa," chuckled Jim Kirby. "When he finds out about you an' me, Mary, maybe he'll be laughin' on the other side of his greasy pan."

Jim Kirby slouched over in his saddle far enough to loop an arm around Mary Lathrop. She lifted her sun-bronzed face to meet his kiss. Her lips were warm and sweet, so he missed her worried smile, and the quick watchfulness of her brown eyes.

"It sounds convincin', Jim," she said breathlessly. "Your ridin' into Range City in the store clothes of a tenderfoot pilgrim may have fooled Hauser. But he's smart, honey. If he finds us out—"

She stopped speaking. Her tapering, strong fingers gripped his arm.

When he rode into town in the store clothes of a tenderfoot pilgrim, Jim Kirby should have known that it takes more than clothes to make the man.

Jim's iron smashed down on the gunnie and sent him tumbling.

There was a faint rustle of movement in the full moonlight. Jim Kirby's eyes darted in a quick survey of the badlands chaparral.

He had that instinctive sense of a man who is an old hand at riding *malpais,* brush-popping wild cattle, trapping *ladinos*—the mavericks of the mountain wilderness. He heard no more than Mary, but he wished he could be sure he had not been soft trailed from Range City.

"Easy, Jim," whispered the girl,

her supple figure turning in the deep Mex saddle on her tough blue grulla horse. "If the *ladinos* get to that bald spot of grama grass, I'll be hard put to it to razoo one from here. Stay put, honey. There's old Pedro's signal they're moving in."

Lanky Jim Kirby froze in his saddle. All the deepest love any hombre could hold for a woman stirred him. The beautiful, magnetic Mary was still a miracle difficult to believe.

Jim remained motionless as Mary took the braided riata off the saddle horn, building a loop that blurred in a perfect circle above the *huisache* bush that concealed them from the wild steers. Pedro's second signal, a chirping nightbird call, meant the crucial moment was at hand.

Mary's blue grulla horse shook his hide with a quiver of excitement. Jim's memory turned his thought to the girl's gracefulness, which even the worn leather chaps encasing her long, slender legs could not make less apparent.

"Have a care, lady," whispered Jim. "Why'd I have to be wearin' this dangnation store rig? You'll soon be finished hazin' *ladinos*. As soon as your dad knows, you'll be buildin' biscuits 'stead o' loops for the wild ones."

MARY had the grulla tight reined. The wild steers in the chaparral were edging toward the tempting bait of open grama grass. Jim's breath held as a big, rangy bull stepped into view, head lifted, his movement making no sound.

They were upwind. But the cautious scalawag was sniffing. Perhaps he was being warned of danger by a strange sixth sense. That same sense turned Jim's gaze suddenly upon a sandy stretch spotted with quebradora, the thornless cactus.

The same sense that made the *ladino* suspicious of his feeding ground was trying to tell Jim something. Had a quebradora clump showed shadowy movement? Or were his nerves too tightly strung?

He felt he should stop Mary. Yet he did not wish to alarm her or betray his own sudden fear. Even though his instinct told him that some dire threat was lurking there, hidden in the mesquite and *nopale*.

"Queeck, Mees Mary," came old Pedro's quick warning. "He ees too wise, that bull."

The breeze carried the hoarse whisper away. Pedro was crouched below the *huisache* bush beside the *cabestro*, the lead ox used to drag in fractious wild ones.

The *ladino* was hungry. Wearily, the big scalawag began munching at the grama grass on the open knob. Jim's breath held as Mary's spurs just touched the anxious blue grulla.

Jim pulled into the open, watching now. The grulla shot forward. With a snort, the *ladino* was head up and away, and Jim breathed. Many times a wild one would meet the challenge of surprise with curved, deadly horns, disdaining flight.

But this *ladino* went away. Brush and cactus spikes slapped at the girl's chap-clad legs. A branch snapped her sombrero back and Jim had to wince, knowing the thorns might have found Mary's eyes.

The wild one was just reaching cover of the mesquite when Mary's riata loop whirled out. It settled at the last possible second over the *ladino's* spread horns.

Jim roweled to the girl's side as Mary let run a thirty-foot string, set herself and leaned far over to balance the abrupt strain upon the blue grulla as the trained horse stopped on braced legs. The *ladino* was spilled neatly and Mary was down, her deft hands catching the beast's hindleg in the piggin' rope.

Old Pedro had a habit of laughing at this stage. He came out into the

open space, cackling, and bringing the *cabestro* with its harness and yoke that would effectually subdue the madly kicking *ladino*.

Under cover of old Pedro's cackling and the smashing of dry brush as the *ladino* fought for freedom, Jim's instinct for hidden danger was suddenly justified. The shadow of a man, magnified by the white moonlight, was leaping away toward the concealment of a spreading *juajilla*, a thick species of the catclaw cactus.

"Get down, Mary!" Jim's warning grated as he whirled his own palomino gelding, sending him racing for the *juajilla*. "Keep flat! They's trouble!"

His horse stumbled and slid in the sandy patch from which the lurking spy had sprung up. Pulling the beast up, Jim automatically reached for the gun that should have been on his thigh.

He swore at his own dumbness in failing to change into brush riding gear before coming to give Mary the news. His irons were in his cached warbag.

THEN Jim was balked by the many clumps of *juajilla*. Forced to dismount, he could hear a horse going away down the dry creek bed toward the open Los Palino mesa, some two miles away. It was of no purpose to pursue the skulker now, Jim decided, and he walked quickly back to Mary, leading his horse.

"What in time is it, Jim?" Mary's cleanly chiseled features, her eyes glistening in the moonlight, her hair a misty halo where her 'brero had fallen back on its chin string, made a picture Jim wished he could keep forever.

"It's maybe that I'm a danged sight more thickheaded than Mert Hauser opined when I forked over good dinero for the mesa range," said Jim soberly. "Mary, you reckon your dad wouldn't deal with Hauser in a tight? Without the Bar-M creek, we ain't got a thing but another drought-dried range when the Los Palino creek runs out in summer, an' I'll be another cow waddy with a busted dream."

"Jim, it couldn't be!" exclaimed Mary. "Dad's owin' only to old Randlow, an' Hauser an' Randlow would cut each other's throats. Even if it's found out we'd planned to throw the Bar-M and your mesa together, Hauser and Randlow wouldn't ever join forces."

Jim said, "Yeah, that's so, Mary. All the same, I'd feel a mite safer if I'd been smart an' waited a few days 'fore I rode up to find you. Maybe so no harm's done, an' for once Mert Hauser will get his come uppance."

He said that. He must not worry the girl with what he had seen just before leaving Range City. It had been a meeting, a passing on the street of Mert Hauser, the saloon owner and town boss, and Randlow, the banker, who were reputed to be deadly enemies.

Yet Jim's quick eyes had seen Hauser give a paper, perhaps a note, to Randlow, their hands barely touching and neither man speaking. Jim had been in the window of the general store when he had seen the incident.

"I wish it was settled, honey," said the girl as old Pedro lashed the *ladino* to the lead ox, and was ready to start. "Until it is—"

"Sure," said Jim. "Until it is, I'll just haul off an' crawl into the old bedroll like always. But I'm thinkin' you'd best stick at home, Mary. Sound out your dad, an' send Pedro to me."

"But there must be one more *ladino*, Jim," explained Mary, as she shook her head. "It will make up a bunch that'll pay off dad's note on the Bar-M, then we can palaver with him. Nothing has ever put me in fear on the Los Palino, and nothing ever will."

Jim was sorely troubled. He had to think this out.

"Then I'll ride the malpais early tomorrow night, waiting for you, honey," he said. "Moon up will be nigh midnight."

Mary shook her head. "It's one time, Jim, I think best we shouldn't take chances. We planned it you wouldn't meet me until the Bar-M was clear. If the skulker you chased was a Hauser hombre, we—"

A HARD, mocking voice punctuated Mary's speech abruptly.

"And if he was a Hauser hombre, you schemin' hellion, then what?"

Jim Kirby pivoted. That voice could come from only the rat-trap mouth of Mert Hauser himself. Once again Jim instinctively reached for the six-gun that should have been belted at his thigh.

The *juajilla* clumps erupted half a dozen shadows of men who must have crept up at the moment Jim had chased the one skulker he had seen. Guns glinted in the moonlight.

"Drop, Mary!" grated Jim, cursing himself silently for a fool, and whirling toward Mary's grulla horse for the carbine usually in the saddle boot.

He recalled too late that you don't use a horse with a rifle banging over his ribs to rope wild bulls.

Old Pedro cried out.

"El Diablo!" It was a name Mary had told Jim Pedro had given to Mert Hauser.

There was the flying gleam of a knife in the moonlight. One of the hombres advancing with drawn guns yelled with agony as the keen blade sliced into his arm. Jim pivoted, lunged toward another man who had drawn a quick bead on the old Mexican.

But Mert Haser cracked out a command.

"Hold it! They ain't no shootin' 'less I give orders! Beat down that cow waddy callin' himself Jim Kirby!"

Jim's dive carried him into the one rifleman. His fist was buried in the gunnie's stomach and Jim grabbed at the weapon as the man doubled and groaned. He heard Mary utter a little scream.

With the rifle in his hands, Jim came around. He was just in time to see Mary jerked from her feet, a riata loop tightened around her body. Mert Hauser himself was in the open, a riding quirt in his hand.

"Drop the gun, Kirby, or I'll slash her face."

Jim heard the whip as Hauser lashed it past Mary's head. He faced the odds of at least four other armed men. Behind him old Pedro uttered a groan as Jim heard the crunching of a rifle stock upon bone.

Jim faced the hatch-faced Hauser, permitting the captured rifle to slip from his hands.

"What's the idea, Hauser?" he demanded. "So you cottoned to me being a puncher an' not a gullible Easterner. That should even up for others who've bought your damnation mesa with its Spring snow creek that dries off every Summer an' hands the range back to you."

Hauser's voice was brittle with ominous anger.

"Bein' smart, I reckon you seen somethin' pass 'tween Randlow an' me back in town?" Hauser's voice was edged. "Seems Randlow was wise, when he saw you, that you'd been makin' up to Mary Lathrop six months back when she was visitin' on the Shadow range south. Puttin' two and two together, an' it makes out that you figured on buyin' the Los Palino mesa off me, an' havin' plenty of water from the Bar-M creek by hitchin' up with Mary."

Mary's voice was low but tense.

"Don't talk Jim. It'll be the same whatever you say. Yes, if you think so, Mert Hauser, you have it pegged. Jim come into Range City as a tenderfoot and you run your usual ranny. An' if anything happens to him, I'm

Mary screamed as the maddened bulls charged at them.

seein' your crooked deals for that mesa are made known in the government land office at Phoenix."

"Mary—"

It was too late to shut her off, but Jim realized she was but adding to their danger with her defiance. His effort to caution her got no further than uttering her name.

A rifle barrel rapped cruelly across his skull from the rear. As he fell, his senses fading slowly, he could hear Mert Hauser as from a distance.

"Keep savin' lead, for I ain't want-

in' ary of 'em marked other than the way I've figured—"

The remainder of Hauser's speech was lost to Jim.

ROLLING over and over, his body bruised and battered by rocky points projecting into a flooding creek, Jim Kirby came to consciousness. His confused senses told him nothing quickly.

Jim's first feeble effort to reach a footing, to stop the hammering at his pain-wracked body, was guided by instinct alone. When he was nearly strangled, his feet touched bottom. Then he was on a spit of sand extending into a creek.

This would be Wild Horse creek, he thought. It was the stream running through the land he had purchased with good dinero and a note to Mert Hauser. Another creek on the Bar-M ranch adjoining the mesa range, owned by John Lathrop, Mary's father, ran quiet and deep and lasting.

Aching in every bone and muscle, Jim managed to discover he had no broken bones. It came to him that he had been dumped in the creek to be drowned, after being knockd out.

"From what Hauser said, that would appear as if I had fallen by accident and struck my head," mused Jim. "Being so, the killers would like as not leave my hoss loose some'ere on the mesa land as a bit of clinching evidence."

Judging by the moon still riding high, Jim thought he could not have been long in the creek. This was the creek that caused a great mesa range to grow grazing grama grass during the Spring, but which petered out with the last of the mountain snow.

When Mary had first told Jim of this mesa, and the annual swindle conducted by Mert Hauser, she had also told him of her father's adjoining Bar-M. Once Mary's father had wanted to buy the mesa. It furnished good grazing and hay into midsummer.

In late Summer and Fall, a big herd could have been moved to the Bar-M for water and grass, there being enough for Fall and Winter feed. When Mary had discovered that Jim Kirby was the hombre she had been waiting for, their combined wits had planned a deal that would give Jim a ranch for his savings and a home for Mary and him.

John Lathrop, crippled for two years, had borrowed on the Bar-M from Randlow, the banker in Range City. Jim had been amazed when Mary had told him she had about paid off the notes by trapping *ladinos* in the higher badlands.

Jim's brain was spinning and he wasted precious minutes before he could begin the hunt for his horse. When he found the beast, there was nothing he could do.

"The dirty killers!" he raged. "That would make it look real!"

His horse, still saddled, lay half in the tumbling creek. He found out the beast's off foreleg had been brutally broken.

Jim looked at the shadowy rim of the range where the badlands were covered by night shadows. It was but a short way to where he had cached his warbag, with a rifle and his .45 wrapped in the bedroll, while he had posed as a tenderfoot Easterner in Range City.

Even as he was armed, Jim's heart contracted. Without conscious thought or hope of what he could do, he started shagging toward the jagged rim against the bright, moonlit sky. He wished he had no mind now to put upon Mary, in the hands of Mert Hauser and his town gunnies.

"Hauser didn't want any shootin'," reasoned Jim, his stride lengthening as his strength became greater. "Our idea about the mesa and the Bar-M, with Mary's dad agreeable, would have ruined his yearly grab off the mesa sale. An' Mary said she'd see that the land office was informed."

Yes, he wanted to stop thinking then. And he was running, his lungs hurting, his heart thumping his ribs.

"No shootin'?" he said grimly. "But Hauser wouldn't allow Mary to come out of the badlands alive. He wouldn't take that chance. He went to some trouble to make it appear I was drowned, so with Mary he might try—"

JIM stopped running suddenly. The night breeze, always blowing downward with the greater cooling of the higher range, assailed his senses with the impact of a blow.

Not that the mere smell of freshly killed beef, of bovine blood should bring any terrible premonition. But that breeze came off the malpais where Mary and Pedro were likely still the prisoners of Hauser and his men.

Jim tried to keep his thoughts from adding, "If they are still alive—"

To Jim the fresh beef blood smell being wafted for miles on the mountain breeze suddenly loomed as a terrible murder weapon. Only a brush-popper, long schooled in the habits of wild stock, would have identified the origin of the blood smell and its deadly meaning.

Jim was climbing the rocks now, ignoring a possible trail. Other keen noses would be scenting that bovine blood. Perhaps he was too late. From the remote canyons and draws of the badlands would come the worst of the *ladinos*—wild bulls, young and old, spike-horned and raging.

Bovine blood, sprinkled through the chaparral, touched off the killing instinct of the *ladinos*. From a long distance, as far as the shifting malpais winds carried the scent of the blood, the wild bulls would come.

If undisturbed, their curved dangerous horns would clash in a battle royal. Usually the bovine blood was the bait for an *ocotillo* thorn corral, a trap. Lurking in an upwind, many riders would drive the bulls with shooting into the trap.

Jim hit the faint trail where Mary had most often entered the first edge of the chaparral, where the mesquite was highest.

"Hauser ain't runnin' a wild bull trap," reasoned Jim, his mad pulse slowing and his blood chilling. "He kept his gunslingers from shootin'. Who's to savvy that Mary ain't fool enough to set a *ladino* trap like that without plenty o' ridin' help?"

As if in confirmation of his terrible premonition, he heard a beast rustling through the mesquite. And Mary's trained blue grulla stepped out into the moonlight, riderless.

JIM KIRBY raised his rifle when a single Hauser gunslick suddenly emerged from the chaparral a short distance away. The gunnie's loop was already swinging.

"Hauser couldn't have Mary's hoss runnin' off home," said Jim between set teeth. "The grulla would have to be found along with—"

He tried to quit thinking about that. His rifle was lowered. If he were to shoot now, Jim realized it would echo far up the slope of the mountain and over the badlands. Mary's grulla sensed Jim's presence and turned toward him.

Muttering oaths, the pursuing gunslinger fed steel to his beast. His loop snaked out and dropped over the grulla's neck, bringing the cayuse up short.

Jim's next movement was instinctive. Avoiding a shot, he groped about in the loose volcanic rock drift. The triumphant gunnie set his horse as the grulla reared and tried to break away.

Jim's long arm snapped. A flung rock the size of a fist clunked against bone. Jim thanked the gods for the practice he'd had throwing at leaping jackrabbits. The gunslick grunted and reeled, not quite out.

Jim was upon him with a fast stride and a jump. He had caught up his rifle again and he swung its steel barrel without compunction. He hauled down the rearing horse.

Tying the gunnie with his own riata, taken off the grulla, and gagging him with his own torn shirt, Jim mounted Mary's grulla. He was riding the gunnie's beast as he went into the chaparral, and he had quickly traded for the gunslinger's chaps, his 'brero and his windbreaker.

The scent of beef blood grew stronger. Jim rode toward the spot where Mary had been captured. The bald grama grass ridge was empty. No squad or movement came from the chaparral.

The scent of bovine blood had been strong. The bait had been put out from a sack some distance away, probably where the wild bulls would have an open space for their fierce charging.

Jim reined the cayuse about. A faint, terrible cry came to his ears. He urged his horse into the cactus, but the direction was with the wind and he lost the guiding scent of fresh blood.

"Mary?" Jim's lips moved stiffly in a little prayer. "I'm comin' an' I've got to be in time."

Draws and cactus patches, with cluttered black rocks were confusing. Only his sense of the brush guided Jim now. He was compelled to hold up, to get his bearings by the wind on his face.

It came to him then, the first rumbling bellow of a wild *ladino* off to one side. It was promptly answered by another challenge over the other way. Soon there would be as many of the deadly *ladinos* as the scent of blood had reached.

Thorny branches slapped at Jim's face. He bent low. In a clear space two riders suddenly appeared. One was bulky, with a white Stetson on his beefy head. Jim identified Randlow, the Range City banker, in the moonlight.

The hombre with Randlow whipped out a short gun. But Randlow called out, cautiously.

"Hold it, Ables! That's one of Hauser's boys! Hiya, Harker!"

"Hiya!" grunted Jim. "Yuh seen the boss? I had to ketch up the dang' hellion's hoss!"

"Nope, jest trailed in, Harker!" replied Randlow.

RANDLOW'S man lowered his gun, pushing it back into leather. Jim's spurs bit into his horse. Bending low, freeing Mary's grulla, he jumped his beast forward. His .45 iron came up in one hand. The other hand was only a salty, punching fist.

The banker's hombre tried to pull up his smoker, but Jim's iron clogged the gunnie's throat with his own teeth and sent him tumbling. The fat, soft Randlow cried out as Jim's knuckles relieved their fierce itching in the banker's throat.

This was one time Jim had no minutes to waste. It was unlucky for the hired gunslinger. Jim thrust his iron in leather after the slamming blow put the gunnie away.

Still conscious, mumbling, slavering with fear, Randlow, the fat banker, was on the ground, one foot trapped in a stirrup as Jim gathered in his beast's reins.

"No! No!" Randlow had seen the fate of his gunnie. Also he had recognized Jim Kirby. "I was ridin'—just comin' to warn the gal—Hauser, the dirty snake, is meanin' her no good—he's out to get you, too, Kirby—I was—"

Jim's hand reached, his fingers twisted, and they held one of the banker's ears.

"Shut your trap, or I'll pistol whip you for keeps," warned Jim. "Climb into that saddle, an' ride ahead. Don't make ary false moves either, Randlow."

Almost blubbering, Randlow was hauled back into the hull. Jim nudged him ahead with his iron, and followed, leading Mary's grulla. His heart was sick by now, for rumbling threats, crashing beasts were coming from three directions. Answering the blood call, the caution of the *ladinos* was forgotten.

Randlow cried out, "In heaven's name, Kirby! Whatcha meanin' to do?"

There had been the first rending clash of horns, the fierce snorting of rage from two colliding beasts. Anything alive that got in the way of the infuriated battlers would be quickly destroyed. Savage, blind fury was on the loose.

Jim punched Randlow's back with the .45, spurring ahead, and leaning close.

"I'm meanin' the same's happenin' to you, Randlow, as Hauser intends should happen to Mary Lathrop!"

"No, Kirby—you can't do that—" Randlow wheezed in terror. "It's murder—I didn't—"

"You've named your own brand, Randlow!" rapped out Jim. "So you come ridin' 'cause you knew it was to be murder?"

Jim split one of Randlow's ears with the sight of his gun. At the banker's cringing, Jim cursed him, and headed their beasts straight for the noise of the battle where at least two more *ladinos* had thundered into a charge.

Randlow reeled, tried to fall upon the saddle. Jim leaned over and pulled him back. As he did, the bright moonlight became darkly shadowed, but not quickly enough to hide the sight of Mary.

Jim's fury of imagination ran a dizzying riot of blood to his brain. Mary was still dressed in her tough leather chaps buckled to the belt about her waist. But she was groping about blindly in an open sink where two fighting bulls had already tramped a Spring ooze to a quagmire.

As Jim's eyes picked out the girl, his horse reared suddenly. He was unprepared, still bent over toward Randlow. His foot slipped from a stirrup and he started falling between the horses.

EVERYTHING seemed to crash at once. Mary must have heard Jim's quick cry to drop, to lie flat, even as he himself was falling. The thing that had panicked the gunnie's beast on which Jim was riding was a huddled body with a dark, smooth face turned up to the moonlight.

Old Pedro already was a sodden corpse. He had been gored and then trampled. Down from a ridge, converging in the sink, nearly a dozen killer *ladinos* crashed through the chaparral, obeying nature's own urge in the high smell of fresh bovine blood laid across that sink.

Randlow, as Jim fell, freed his horse's reins, turning the beast. Jim was compelled to let go of his reins and the lead string to Mary's grulla. Mary's scream came then, high and terrified, and Jim realized her fear was for him rather than herself.

"Jim! Go back! On the hill, Jim! In the rocks! Look out!"

Climbing to his feet as the horses pivoted and jumped away. Jim saw two *ladinos* charging, their heads lowered, curved horns set for the kill. In the wavering light of the moon, Mary was still groping blindly, and she appeared to occupy the spot where the tons of flesh and bone would come together.

Jim could not see the thing that blinded Mary. Her face showed clearly. Jim made one awful guess. The stinging, poison fuzz weed, a thornless nettle, could cause her eyes to swell shut.

Jim was running recklessly into the open, then, his six-gun his only weapon. For a moment his appearance

as the gunnie, Harker, must have stayed Hauser's guns. Jim was too late, for Mary, unable to see, had at last obeyed his command and had thrown herself flat.

Jim's thoughts were unutterable as the mad *ladinos* collided. He could see Mary's shoulder under their pounding hooves. It appeared useless, but he started thumbing lead into the neck of one bull.

That revealed his identity. A line of chattering red fire ran along the rocky hill where Hauser's gunnies were in waiting. Bullets whispered viciously about Jim and one leg went numb.

He staggered forward as one of the bulls fell and the other *ladino* ripped it open with spiky horns. Jim was diving, sliding, and he saw the red graze across Mary's shoulder. But she was lifting her head, trying to call out to him as another bellowing, snorting *ladino* came from the chaparral, hurling its weight upon the victor of the two-way battle.

Jim's arm went over Mary. The rasping, hard voice of Mert Hauser cut the night above the bedlam.

"You locoed muleheads! I said not to shoot! Stop it! The gal mustn't be marked!"

The gunfire ceased. But at least three other *ladinos* were in a triple battle royal only a little way over in the sink. Jim's arm went over Mary, and his lanky body was hunched over to shield her from the next hooves that might drive upon the spot.

WITH the training and cold nerve of the brush-popper, Jim held the girl motionless and close to him. His pulse ran riot even in this death trap at the nearness of the one woman he had put above all others he had ever met. In their danger, she was closer than ever.

"Don't move, an' shut your eyes," said Jim. "Nary bull will gore us, an' no animal would touch us if we're seemin' dead."

It was the old, nervy trick of the brusher and woodsman. Any hombre with cold nerve enough to lie still would remain untouched by the most vicious of the mountain animals.

Mary's swollen eyes proved Jim's surmise to be correct. She had been blinded temporarily by the stinging fuzz-weed. Jim had never before wanted so much to kill as now.

"They said you were dead, honey," whispered Mary.

He kissed her and tried to reply lightly.

"We'll come out, darling—move with me as I roll over—this way, an' pronto."

Jim had realized that if they were saved from the battling beasts, in the end the guns of Hauser would finish them. His sudden strategy rolled them behind the body of the slain bull, putting its carcass between them and any further gunfire from the hill.

"They'll have to come into the open to reach us," said Jim grimly, moving enough to slip fresh shells into his .45. "When they do—"

Then a horse's scream of death agony cut off his speech.

Although dying, that horse was still running. The cayuse loped into the sink. A maddened *ladino*, charging the horse again, raked its side with a slicing horn. The rider in the saddle screamed then, his leg being torn by the bull's spike from knee to ankle.

Horse and rider went down. The bull, clearing its horn, backed off and circled, again coming in. Jim clamped his hands over Mary's ears. Randlow, the banker, who had come to join Hauser in a little game of murder, got to his feet.

Randlow's scream was like the squeal of a stuck pig. Jim saw Mert Hauser rear into view between hill rocks. He risked a fast shot, but Hauser ducked as Randlow turned, fac-

ing the driving spikes that were but a few feet now from his paunchy stomach.

"Mert! Before heaven, Mert! Don't let me die! I come to side you, Mert! I'll give yuh the Bar-M—"

The Range City banker's screamed, self condemning words in appeal to Mert Hauser brought no help, not even one bullet which had slight chance, anyway, of halting the charging beast. Jim went sick when the last awful scream of Randlow echoed across the chaparral.

A *ladino* with terrible, bloody horns was backing away from the bulk on the ground. The ruthless Hauser had no mercy, even though Randlow still moved pitifully.

"Don't shoot him!" rasped out Hauser's voice, raised to reach all of his gunnies in the rocks. "It'll put the blame on Randlow, an' like he accidental-like got trapped!"

FOR the moment the battling *ladinos* had moved out of the sink. They were still crashing, snorting and bellowing in the chaparral. Jim swore softly because he had no target among the hill rocks. If he could line up Hauser with his short gun, he felt they might have a chance with the other gunslicks, left without a boss and a probable payoff.

Mary was lying close to the thick body of the dead *ladino*. Jim whispered, "Don't move, no matter what I say or do, understand.

He gave the girl no time to protest. Hauser had shown he was still mercilessly determined to bring about more murder without condemning or convicting bullet marks. On that he had to depend, to risk their lives.

It was a daring gamble that had come to his mind. It caused him to flip the .45 cylinder and eject its shells. Then as the wild *ladinos* surged through the chaparral above the sink, their battle for the moment moving away, Jim jumped to his feet, knowing his bullet numbed leg would drag.

"You dirty killer!" he shouted. "I'm comin' for yuh, Mert Hauser! You've murdered her, an' I'm gettin' you personal!"

In the revealing moonlight he threw up his six-gun and triggered it. There was only a metallic snap. Jim was apparently as locoed as any living hombre could be.

Yelling out oaths that he hoped Mary would forgive, he started running toward the hill rocks, still triggering his empty gun. Then, as the gunslicks held up their fire, and he knew Hauser must be seeing his panicked effort, Jim yelled wildly and hurled his empty .45 at the rocks.

At the same time he turned, limping, but trying to flee out of the sink and away from the danger of the rocks. Hauser's mocking laugh and voice came to him.

"You blunderin' fools let him live, so I'm gittin' him personal this time!" sang out Hauser. "Them's the last of the bulls!"

Hauser, astride a tall horse, broke from the rocks. Jim kept on staggering away, but verging over toward the spot of Spring ooze that had been trampled to soft quagmire by recently battling bulls. He skirted close to the edge of the hole, stumbling to one side and putting the soft stuff directly between him and Hauser's rushing horse.

He saw that Hauser was swinging a rifle by the barrel, ready to club him down. He turned desperately, throwing up his hands, and fell upon his face. Apparently he was trying to scramble to his feet as Hauser let out a gloating shout.

"So you'd trick Mert Hauser, huh! You'd trap me into selling the mesa—"

HAUSER'S confident derision ended abruptly. His smart horse had attempted to shy to one side, but

with his eyes fixed upon his kill, Jim Kirby, the Range City town boss had no thought but to yank the beast's head around.

The horse went into the quagmire, foreleg going knee deep at the first step. The animal went down and Hauser, his rifle flailing the air, catapulted over the horse's ears.

Jim was up, jumping with all the strength of his unwounded leg. He landed on top of the floundering Hauser, driving his head and face into the oozy mud. He realized four gunslicks had mounted and were starting to ride down upon him.

Jim's weight held Mert Hauser as he tore the Winchester repeater from the killer's grasp, making sure the muzzle had missed the mud. Then Jim flattened, sinking his whole body in the quagmire. The four charging gunslicks started using their short guns.

Jim picked the first one from the saddle. He took the second killer, levering the rifle. Two wildly running horses, riderless, reared and crabbed sidewise.

The surviving gunnies, caught by surprise, whirled to one side. Their instinct for direction was poor, and Jim refrained from shooting again. He saw the lone *ladino,* snorting and charging from the chaparral.

One rider reined so sharply that his horse slipped and fell. The other rider was given no time for even that. Jim closed his eyes. He opened them to send a bullet into a ripped beast's head, not wanting to see him suffering.

Two more of the blood maddened *ladinos* thundered from the chaparral. Jim tried to stop his ears and keep his eyes away. He knew that Mert Hauser was no longer breathing. Jim's weight had been upon the murder boss in the oozy quagmire. Hauser's last two gunnies had ceased all movement where they lay beside their horses.

WITH old Pedro's body across the *cabestro,* and with Mary's blue grulla guiding himself, they rode slowly down the trail toward the Bar-M. A windbreaker covered Mary's shoulders, but her hand was warm on Jim's arm.

He leaned over in the saddle and Mary's lips were alive with promise. Jim Kirby tried not to think of what lay behind them in the badlands blood trap.

If he had any lingering regret for having become a sudden and deadly killer for the first time in his riding years, he had but to glance at Mary's still blinded, swollen eyes. It would be at least a week befor the fuzzweed poison would be abated.

He told her that with some hesitation.

"But you must ride in the morning to Range City, Jim, to report the truth," replied Mary. "Parson Smith will be glad enough to make the ride back with you to the Bar-M."

Her reply was highly satisfactory.

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PAINT YOUR EPITAPH WITH BLOOD

(Continued from page 23)

McLean turned, listening to the light, quick tap of heels in the hall. Sheila LeMay came swiftly into the room. She stopped suddenly, staring in horror at Dressler. She stared a long time and then she looked at Rickenbaugh and McLean saw that her eyes were blazing. She whipped a little snub-nosed revolver from the front of her dress and pointed it at the unconscious Rickenbaugh. But McLean leaped across the room and knocked the weapon out of her hand.

Her lips thin and bloodless, she faced him. "Why didn't you let me kill him?" she asked bitterly. "Why did you have to stop me? He killed the only man I ever really loved."

McLean brushed the hair back out of his eyes. "Let's leave him for the law to handle," he said. "He'll get what's coming to him."

Sheila LeMay's face was hard. "I'll see to that," she said. "I'll tell what I know—how he killed Dundee and blamed it on another man. How he forged Dundee's signature to some papers. Oh, I'll fix him all right!"

Boots pounded along the hall and a moment later Press Goodlow came through the door, breathing heavily. He stopped, his eyes sweeping the room, then coming to rest on McLean. "Looks like you've gotten everything pretty well taken care of," he said.

McLean smiled. "You get around a lot, Sheriff."

The lawman glanced at Sheila LeMay, then back to McLean. He said, "Beth Dundee was kind of worried about you, so she followed you when you left her place. She saw that you were heading up here and she came back and got me out of bed."

McLean didn't want to stick around this house any longer. He felt the need of some fresh air and he wanted to send a telegram to Bob and tell him he wouldn't be in that jailhouse much longer. He wanted to see Beth and tell her she could stop her worrying. There were other things he wanted to tell her and one of these days he would get around to it. It was too soon now, but he figured on being here a long time.

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SHE CHEATED THE HANGMAN

(Continued from page 47)

down to stand on rubbery legs. He felt weak and miserable. Taffy was smiling through the grime on his face. He didn't look a bit disappointed.

Then, he heard Jane's voice. "Mr. Redfield, I want to thank you for what you've done, but . . ." Suddenly she saw the blood on Johnny's shirt, "Johnny, oh, Johnny, you've been hurt!" Her hair was tousled, dress mussed and bloodstained, but she was concerned about him. Then she smiled and said, "Sheriff Jones told me the whole story. If I'd only known!" Jane's dirt-smudged face turned up to him and her eyes were soft, like he'd imagined they could be. Then she said, "Johnny, I'm not going to testify in court tomorrow."

Dave Jones was smiling wearily, his arm in a sling of petticoat cloth, the other hand holding a black satchel. Taffy Maddox had Tip Masino in tow. The old lawman looked relieved as he said:

"Well, Johnny, if the little lady won't testify, I figure there isn't much of a case." He added, "And I'm sure going to tell them what you did on this trip."

Dave looked at Tip Masino and then back to Johnny and Jane,

"This little hombre'll be out of circulation for quite a spell. Him and them lobos that were gunnin' for us tonight, were going to rob the bank at Hondo, but this one got greedy. Being the chief teller, he knew the combination on the safe. The boys didn't want us, they just wanted Masino's hide and his satchel."

Johnny's legs were fading, the buildings bobbed like boats on water and the ground swelled and rolled beneath him. Sinking slowly to the ground, he felt Jane's arms around him and he managed to say, "You cheated, honey, you cheated the hangman tonight." Her arms cradled him warmly.

A COWHAND SIDES THE SODBUSTERS

(Continued from page 59)

of them. But Ron's thumb hit the hammer pronto while Harv's gun was swinging up. Hoyt doubled over with the smash of lead, his only shot splitting a spoke of a wagon wheel. He flopped like a dropped sack, with no more life in him than one.

Isham looked down at his dead ramrod, muttering, "Well, he got his needin's, the double-crosser!" Then his head came up, his eyes probing Gunnis. "If the rustlers didn't get away with any cattle, what about the tracks leadin' out of the canyon?"

Ron was blowing the smoke from his gun barrel. "I took seventy head to the starvin' homesteaders, boss. That was after the fight."

"You what?" bellowed Isham. "Knowin' I had refused . . . you stole my cattle and gave 'em to snivelin', tail-draggin' sodbusters!"

"I helped him, Isham." Tansy ranged himself beside Ron. "And if you don't say we did right, I'll be ashamed I ever knew and worked for you!"

"Seems my spread is full of double-crossers—" began Isham. His violent speech was arrested by the rattle

of wheels. He looked down the canyon as a rickety wagon entered, its torn cover flapping in the wind, the bony horses sliding on the icy grade. "More sodbusters!" fumed Isham.

RON and Tansy stared a moment, then hurriedly lifted the body of Hoyt into the bed wagon and chained up the tailgate. Brad Cullen was driving the homesteader wagon. On the seat with him were his wife and Roxie, the heads of the two boys showing at the sides. The vehicle came to a halt and old Isham stood peering from under wide hatbrim.

"Don't you know me, father?" Mrs. Cullen said, her cheeks flushed. "Of course, you didn't know you were helping us, along with the others, when you sent Ron and Tansy with the beef cattle. But we thought it so generous of you that we ought to thank you in person."

"Ella!" Bryce said. It was the voice of a lonely old man, who, inflexibly headstrong, had been eating his heart out in secret. And the sound of it brought a smile to Ron's lips. He sheathed his gun.

Roxie stepped down over a front wheel. She was all smiles as she approached old Isham. "I'm your granddaughter, Roxana! I've wanted to meet you for ever so long."

"Such a big girl!" exclaimed Isham. He bent to kiss her. There was a patter of feet as the boys, dropping from the wagon, raced to join their sister. Isham cried, "Don't tell me these are my grandsons?"

"Sure we are, granddad," retorted the older boy. "I'm Isham, named for you, and this is Braddon, named for dad."

"Well, now, that's amazin' fine!" The old cowman grasped a hand of each, beaming. Suddenly he glanced back at Ron and Tansy. "Why didn't you boys tell me the Cullens were down in the basin?"

"Mrs. Cullen's orders, boss," Ron replied.

Ella and her husband had got down from the wagon. "He's right, dad," she said. "I was doubtful of our welcome."

Isham cleared his throat. "Mighty glad you came, though I'll have to give Ron and Tansy credit for goin' to the rescue with that beef herd. They made me see I ought to do it, never breathin' a word about you folks. I'll make sure no homesteader suffers for want of fresh beef while I'm here. The outfit heads west in the spring."

"Will you be taking Ron along?" asked Roxie.

"I hope so. I want him as ramrod, to replace my old one. Why?"

Roxie didn't answer but went on light feet to the smiling puncher in the background. Tansy and the rest of the hands melted away, leaving them alone by the wagons. A little later, Roxie slipped out of Ron's embrace.

"You won't go west without me, will you, Ron?"

"Not me! I wouldn't take the risk of losin' you to some other fellow before I got back this way." He pulled her arm through his. "Let's go and tell the folks how it is between us."

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TROUBLE IN REVERSE

(*Continued from page* 85)

Fred holloed: "Halt!" But the bandit kept on going.

Cassidy's broad back, with moonlight on it, presented an easy target, but Fred Jackson couldn't shoot, even a killer, in the back.

Within another quarter-mile, the gully narrowed, offering a chance for a good horse to jump it.

When Fred's horse learned his rider wished for him to jump the place, he took the bit in his teeth and snapped through the air.

Fred thought his backbone shortened a couple of inches at the landing, but the horse did not slacken pace. Cassidy's mount could not equal its speed.

Cassidy hipped over in the saddle and triggered his Colt, but with too much haste for accurate work from his position.

As Fred came abreast, he suddenly swayed his horse aside. Fred dived, caught the horse's reins with his left hand and yanked both horses to a skidding stop.

As Cassidy jerked up his gun, Fred grabbed it with his right hand, tugged, twisted. Cassidy's grip equalled a vise; his arms matched bear's paws. The horses grew fidgety and spread apart. Fred had to hold both of them with his left hand, which did not come easy. Cassidy's gun blared. Powder burnt Fred's hand. A ball scorched his neck.

Fred dared not relax his efforts. He must hold the gun or forfeit his life. Their horses spread so far apart that Fred became forced to lean far over. Cassidy nearly dragged him from his saddle. At full arm's length, he managed to slant the weapon's barrel over and thumb its hammer. The bullet that came from it, ripped a jagged hole in Cassidy's chest. With a terrified glare in his eyes, he tumbled from the saddle.

"My pocket!" he gasped.

Fred dropped down beside the fallen outlaw and searched a bulging pocket. It contained Jennie's money box.

"G-g-give to gal, e-ef she ain't ddd—" The bandit's last breath went out.

WHEN Fred got back to town, the team and wagon stood in the place they usually occupied when not in use during business hours. Chuck snuggled safely in his bonds. Fred stepped from his horse, tied him behind the wagon and drove the team to the courthouse.

"Put this feller in jail," he told the sheriff when he came out. "And that's his horse hitched behind. How's the girl, Sheriff?"

"She's all right. I took her over to my house."

While Fred helped the sheriff put Chuck in jail, he related the whole story, omitting no important details.

"You've done well," the sheriff commented. "You got all but one of the gang, and that one'll make himself mighty scarce around here now."

Both of them then went over to the sheriff's home. Jennie carried a nasty gash along one side of her head, which a doctor had already dressed.

"Did you get Bill?" she wanted to know.

"Yes, I got him—with his own gun. Had to do it. But before he passed out, he told me to give you this box. I'm wondering how he found it."

Jennie explained: "Why, when it got to raining so hard, I put it in my pocket to keep it dry, and didn't have time to hide it before Cassidy pulled me out of the seat."

"All right, I'm clean busted now, and I'll go out to help you live on your ranch, if you'll let me," Fred offered. "We can make a go of it together."

"Mebbe you can help." Jennie smiled.

"You can have the wedding here," the sheriff cut in. "We'll put on a big feast."

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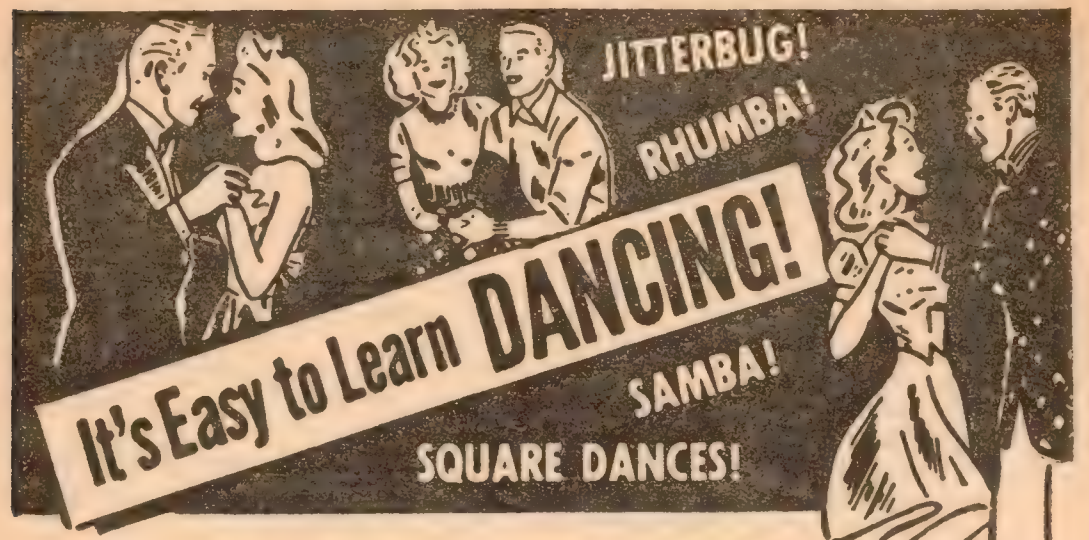

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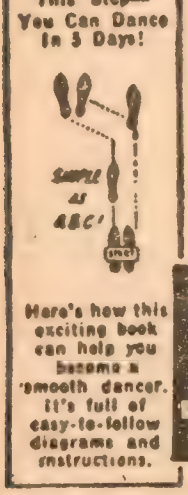
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OWLHOOT SPAWN—BY PROXY

(Continued from page 95)

holdup and two other hombres showing just outside the door would be wanting. But Bob had no thought the gun-slinging visit might portend more than a straight holdup.

"I'll tell yuh what I'm wantin', Crandon, an' you're gonna be some su'prised—"

The bearded holdup's speech was chopped off by sudden crashing of gunfire outside the bank door. The smash of sixguns pulled the leader's eyes around in spite of himself, and he appeared to forget Crandon and Bob as a thin face and a bandaged head loomed in the doorway.

"Uncle Billy?" gasped Bob.

The outlaw leader's next words again drove home what Bob had previously heard.

"So yuh hafta horn in, Buck Collins!" snarled the holdup.

Both of his Colts bucked in his hands as he spoke.

Bob swore as he saw Uncle Billy stagger.

"I'm taking a hand, Cutter Lane!" rang out Uncle Billy's shrillest tone. "An' I'm dealin' yore last card!"

Bob seemed to be caught in a whirlwind of gunsmoke. He saw Uncle Billy slide to the side of the door while gun flame blossomed in both of his old hands. At the same time, Bob had a view of the two owlhooters siding Cutter Lane.

BOB was on his feet, even as he noticed Jasper Crandon ducking behind his desk. Bob's .45 jolted steadily as he sprang toward the doorway and Uncle Billy.

Cutter Lane was down and Bob was compelled to jump over him. The way the notorious killer lay on his face, it was evident that his owlhoot days were over.

One of the men outside had smashed Uncle Billy to his knees with lead that buckled one thigh. Bob slammed home a bullet that caught the outlaw's forehead dead-center.

The surviving owlhooter turned two blazing sixes upon Bob. Hot lead tugged at Bob's sides and numbed one shoulder. Uncle Billy was still on his knees, but he was still shooting. Bob didn't know which guns cut the last Cutter Lane outlaw down.

Bob was staggering, but he carried Uncle Billy inside and put him on Crandon's desk. The banker's gray face appeared and his teeth were clicking. He regained his color only when he was sure the holdup outlaws were dead.

Uncle Billy's pulse was good, but he was bleeding from four wounds about his head and shoulders. Bob used water from a bucket. Then he looked around.

"Sorry, Crandon," stated Bob. "Take off your coat pronto. I've gotta use your white shirt for bandages."

"My shirt?" gulped Crandon. "You gone loco?"

Bob's answer was to rip Crandon's coat and his white shirt from his back without words. Crandon was furious.

"I'm thinking all this was framed!" shouted Crandon. "Being the son of Cutter Lane, you tricked me to open the bank. The outlaws were waiting and—"

Bob did what he had often dreamed he would some day like to do. He changed the shape of Jasper Crandon's proud family nose with a solid punch that sent the banker to the floor.

"If you still hope to git into Congress, you'll keep your yap shut from here on!" blazed Bob and turned back to Uncle Billy. Uncle Billy

opened his eyes and grinned faintly.

"You're too dagnabbed hotheaded, younker," said Uncle Billy. His grin vanished and his face was lined. "Yuh didn't hear what Cutter Lane was spoutin' just afore I cut him down, did you, Bob?"

Bob thought of the name "Buck Collins." But he shook his head. He thought it best to let the past be buried for good.

"Nope," he lied. "There was too much gun thunder to git what was bein' said."

RATTLESNAKE CREW

(Continued from page 105)

will settle into something pretty good if handled right, and there's no limit to the future of the man who gives it the right law now. As far as I'm concerned, you were elected on a gun-blast ballot when you stopped Crass from ruining the town."

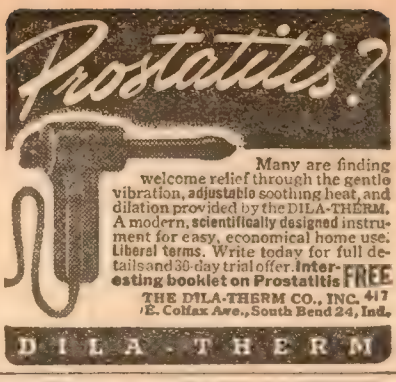
Wolfe tossed the badge he'd taken from Crass's body onto the washstand. Stroking his wet goatee, he said, "I hope you'll wear it and stay here. You see, Beryl's gotten to be like a daughter to my wife and me. Besides, I've always wanted to be a grandpa, even if I was only a foster one."

Smiling up through her tears, Beryl said, "Take the badge if you want it, Beau, and we'll settle down here. And, after all, the children will need grandparents, you know."

"I'll pin it on later." Beau grinned happily.

Looking at Wolfe over Beryl's head, then, Shea forced a ferocious scowl. "An' now," he griped, "that you got ever'thing all settled, grandpa, I reckon it won't be wrong for us to be without a chaperone a minute or two. In other words, Joel Wolfe, will you get to heck out of here?"

Joel Wolfe would. And did.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THE RAMROD'S CORNER

(Continued from page 6)

AND here's Jess Hannon, of La Junta, Colorado, with another interesting letter for us to share with our readers.

"Why do so many of the stories in FIGHTING WESTERN have to be laid in Texas? Why not more of them in Colorado? We've got some real country and before the turn of the century, there were outfits that ran as many as five thousand head of horses along the Cimarron.

"About forty miles from La Junta, there's the Smith Canyon country, where, back in the old days, you could run across as tough a bunch of gents as you'd ever want to meet up with—men who had fogged out of Texas and New Mexico and western Kansas with the law dogs yapping at their heels. There were little known trails leading through the wild cedar break country and the John Laws rode wide of Smith's Canyon.

"When it comes to cows, we had them just as mean and ornery as any of those Texas cattle—and the men who handled those tough old moss horns had to have plenty of savvy. And Texas wasn't the only place they made good saddles, either. Old man Burkhardt down in Trinidad turned out as good a kak as you ever swung your leg over. And, mister, in that rough country along the Cimarron, a man had to have a damned good saddle. The J J ranch, the Circle Diamond and the Wineglass were sure no shoe-string outfits. At one time the JJ ran over fifty thousand head, so if you think that all we did up here was dig for gold, you're dead wrong."

Much obliged, Jess, and we'll agree with you. It sure sounds like a lot of

writing gents are passing up a good bet on that Cimarron Country.

Now here's Irma Lyman, from Liberal, Kansas.

"Just finished reading my first copy of FIGHTING WESTERN and decided to sit right down and let you know what a swell book I think it is. I enjoyed all the stories and you can count on me being a steady reader from now on."

That kind of talk makes us feel mighty good, Irma, because we're trying hard to bring you the very best Westerns being written—stories by the country's tophand yarn spinners. Every month, the big boss receives hundreds of stories and he has to burn plenty of midnight oil deciding just which ones will go into FIGHTING WESTERN. With so many to choose from, it's not an easy chore, but we'll know we're on the right track if all you folks will give us your help.

So if you haven't written in, how about getting busy and letting us hear from you right away? We'll really appreciate it. Just address your postcards and letters to THE RAMROD'S CORNER, FIGHTING WESTERN, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Best of luck to all of you and don't fail to be on hand next issue. There's another big fiction treat in store for you—thrilling, rapid-fire yarns of the men and women who fought against overwhelming odds to bring law and order to that raw, untamed land—the Old West!

Vaya con Dios,
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SAVINGS BONDS

TAOS LIGHTNIN'

By R. A. CRIDER

FEW MEN of the Old West were drunkards, for they could not meet the exacting requirements of frontier life under the influence of liquor. But few were rabid prohibitionists. They took a drink, a good strong one, when they got a chance. When these old mountain men, trappers, and hunters arrived at a settlement, trading post, or the rendezvous, they let out their pent-up feelings. They were rough, tough, half-wild men who had lived for months alone, or in company with a few companions, in danger of being "rubbed out" at any moment. It took a special sort of liquor to suit their taste and get them going.

Fernandez de Taos, nestled high in the Rockies, was a trading center and supply post for trappers, traders, and Indians. It was a thousand miles from the Missouri and Mississippi River settlements, and about half that distance from Chihuahua, the nearest sources of supply. With frontier resourcefulness they made their own liquor, a special kind distilled from wheat. It became famous among the hardy frontier characters. It was sold by the horn; any less was considered a tenderfoot's drink. The drink was so powerful that they dubbed it Taos Lightnin', as that best described its actions. A few horns of it and the mildest trapper became a roaring wildcat.

At the *Fandango* that was held when a band arrived, the trappers became uproarious as the evening ad-

vanced. The señoritas were squeezed in bearlike embraces and whirled around the room in a manner resembling an Indian war dance. The young *caballeros* took it as long as they could, then a knife was drawn at some break of etiquette, and the fight was on. Big, brawny, and tough as the trappers were, and fearless to the point of rashness, they sometimes had as much trouble extricating themselves from these brawls as from an Indian ambush. Usually they left sooner than they had intended. Somewhere along the trail they would stop and bind up the knife wounds. In Taos, they also bound up wounds, repaired the damage done by Taos Lightnin', and swore vengeance.

WITH the advent of the Americans and opening up of the mining camps, military posts, and buffalo-hunter camps, Taos lost its position as chief frontier trade center. Traders from the East brought whiskey in by ox team and pack train, in kegs and in barrels. As a trader was not exactly in business for his health, he contrived to make as much out of the business as possible. He took his original stock and diluted it half with water; then, to hide his trickery, he added something to give it a "kick." A plug or two of tobacco to a keg was inexpensive, besides adding color and restoring some of the potency. Some cayenne pepper might be added to "pep" it up.

Old-timers, who had quaffed many a horn of Taos Lightnin', swore that certain traders added lye, for it took the "hair" right out of the throat. Some traders were accused of adding rattlesnake heads to their liquor to give it the proper strength. These poisonous concoctions were quickly named "rattlesnake pizen" due to the belief that they had been made from rattlesnake heads—or because they were so rotten that they would poison a rattlesnake!

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TO SAVE YOUR HAIR ACT NOW
Send coupon today for 10-day offer. Send No Money

I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.
E. K., Cleveland, Ohio

Out of all the Hair Experts I went to, I've gotten the *most* help from one bottle of Ward's Formula.
C. La M., Philadelphia, Pa.

After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.
R. W. C., Cicero, Ill.

I am tickled to death with the results. In just two weeks' time—no *dandruff! W. T. W., Portola, Cal.*

I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio

Guarantee

This written guarantee entitles you not only to return of price paid for Ward's Formula, but Double Your Money Back unless you actually SEE, FEEL and ENJOY all benefits herein claimed in only ten days. The test is at our risk. All you do is return unused portion or the empty bottle unless completely satisfied.

Ward Laboratories, Inc.

ACT TODAY or YOU MAY BE TOO LATE!

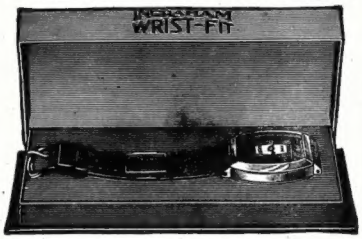
Ward Laboratories, Inc.
1430 Broadway, Dept. 11, New York 18, N. Y.
Rush Ward's Formula to me at once. I will pay postman two dollars plus postage. I must be completely satisfied within 10 days, or you GUARANTEE refund of DOUBLE MY MONEY BACK upon return of bottle and unused portion.

Name .....
Address .....
City ..... Zone..... State.....
☐ Check here if you enclose $2.00 with order, and we will pay postage. Same refund offer holds, of course.
APO, FPO, Canada & Foreign add 50¢ no CODs.

DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

GIVEN

PREMIUMS - CASH



Wrist Watches, Pocket Watches, Alarm Clocks (sent postage paid). Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **GIVE** pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE sold at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amount asked under Premium shown in catalog sent with starting order. Write or mail coupon today. 55th year. **WILSON CHEM. CO., Dept. A-61, TYRONE, PA.**

PREMIUMS - GIVEN - CASH

WE ARE RELIABLE

55th YEAR

ACT NOW

BE FIRST

BE FIRST

BOYS
GIRLS
MEN
LADIES

MAIL COUPON TODAY

Genuine 22 Cal. Rifles, 1000 Shot Daisy Air Rifles with tube of shot (sent postage paid). Boys-Girls Bicycles (sent express charges collect). **SIMPLY GIVE** pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit per catalog sent with starting order postage paid by us. **Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. B-61, Tyrone, Pa.**

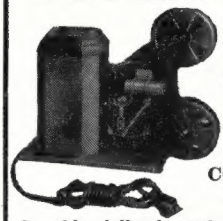
GIVEN

PREMIUMS - CASH

BE FIRST

Pocket Watches, Cameras with Carrying Cases (sent postage paid). **SIMPLY GIVE** art pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE sold at 25 cents a box and remit per catalog sent with starting order postage paid by us. Our 55th year. **Wilson Chemical Co., Dept. C-61, Tyrone, Pa.**

GIVEN - PREMIUMS or Cash Commission



BOYS
GIRLS
LADIES
MEN

MAIL COUPON NOW

Lovable, fully dressed Dolls over 15 inches in height, Movie Projector with roll of film (sent postage paid). Many other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **SIMPLY GIVE** beautiful pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amount asked under Premium shown in catalog sent with your order postage paid by us to start. 55th year. **Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. D-61, Tyrone, Pa.**

GIVEN - GIVEN

PREMIUMS OR CASH COMMISSION

BOYS!
GIRLS!
LADIES!
MEN!

Radios, Footballs, Baseballs, Basketball Sets (sent postage paid). Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **GIVE** pictures with White **Cloverine** Brand **Salve** easily sold at 25c a box (with picture) and remit per catalog sent with starting order. **Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. E-61, Tyrone, Pa.**

MAIL COUPON TODAY

Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. S-61, Tyrone, Pa. Date.....

Gentlemen:—Please send me on trial 13 colorful art pictures with 13 boxes of White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (with picture). I will remit amount within 30 days, select a Premium or keep Cash Commission as fully explained under Premium wanted in catalog sent with my order postage paid to start.

Name ..... Age.....

St. ..... R.D..... Box.....

Town ..... Zone No..... State.....

Print LAST Name Here

Paste on a postal card or mail in an envelope NOW

FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT

DISEASE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD

The cause of the disease is not a germ as so many people think, but a vegetable growth that becomes buried beneath the outer tissues of the skin.

To obtain relief the medicine to be used should first gently dissolve or remove the outer skin and then kill the vegetable growth.

This growth is so hard to kill that a test shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy it; however, laboratory tests also show that H. F. will kill it upon contact in 15 seconds.

DOUBLE ACTION NEEDED

Recently H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's Foot. It both gently dissolves the skin and then kills the vegetable growth upon contact. Both actions are necessary for prompt relief.

H. F. is a liquid that doesn't stain. You just paint the infected parts nightly before going to bed. Often the terrible itching is relieved at once.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED
Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. S. F.
823 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....